

# Revisiting Public Opinion in the 1930s and 1940s

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**ABSTRACT** Studies of mass political attitudes and behavior before the 1950s have been limited by a lack of high-quality, individual-level data. Fortunately, data from public opinion polls conducted during the late New Deal and World War II periods are available, although the many difficulties of working with these data have left them largely untouched for over 60 years. We compiled and produced readily usable computer files for over 400 public opinion polls undertaken between 1936 and 1945 by the four major survey organizations active during that period. We also developed a series of weights to ameliorate the problems introduced by the quota-sampling procedures employed at the time. The corrected data files and weights were released in May 2011. In this article, we briefly discuss the data and weighting procedures and then present selected time series determined using questions that were repeated on 10 or more surveys. The time series provide considerable leverage for understanding the dynamics of public opinion in one of the most volatile—and pivotal—eras in American history.

**T**he decade from 1935 to 1945 was like none other in American history. The Great Depression and World War II transformed American politics. The New Deal revolutionized the relationship between the federal government and its citizens, even as an emerging conservative coalition limited liberal policy innovations after 1937. In the foreign arena, U.S. involvement in World War II ended a long period of American isolationism and set the stage for the global policies of the Cold War. The relationship of public opin-

ion to government policy during these years has considerable importance. Indeed, amid the economic collapse of 2008–10, many political observers have drawn a comparison between the public mood today and popular reactions to the Great Depression in the 1930s. While liberals have wondered why Obama has not mobilized a liberal consensus in the mold of Franklin Roosevelt, conservatives have claimed that the public mood, even in the 1930s, was not all that liberal.<sup>1</sup> However, both sides' claims have been undermined by the limited and selective use of opinion data from the 1930s.

Fortunately, a great deal of data concerning the public's views during this time exists, which, when analyzed carefully and

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systematically, holds considerable potential to illuminate the contours of popular opinion during the greatest economic calamity in American history. Starting in the mid-1930s, polling companies surveyed the public about important issues on a monthly basis. All told, over 400 national surveys were conducted between 1936 and 1945 by George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO), Elmo Roper's polling firm, Hadley Cantril's Office of Public Opinion Research (OPOR), and the National Opinion Research Council (NORC).<sup>2</sup>

These polls include valuable responses to questions concerning government policy. For example, in the two years preceding Pearl Harbor, Gallup repeatedly asked respondents if it was more important to help England or to stay out of the war. Opinion polls also illuminate the public's role in ending the rush of New Deal programs in the late 1930s. Starting in 1936, Gallup frequently asked respondents their opinions about government relief and regulation. Finally, pollsters asked numerous questions related to racial politics on subjects including anti-lynching legislation, the poll tax, fair employment practices, and biological racism. These data enable us to determine how racial attitudes have changed over the last 65 years.

Nonetheless, our understanding of the dynamics of mass opinion and behavior prior to the 1950s has been undermined by problems with early survey data. Modern opinion polls are conducted using probability sampling to ensure that every citizen has an equal chance of being interviewed. However, polls in the United States conducted before the 1950s relied on quota-controlled sampling methods, in which pollsters sought to interview certain predetermined proportions of people from particular segments of the population (see Berinsky 2006 for a description of these practices). While some pollsters used quotas to create a descriptively representative group of citizens (Roper 1940), others designed quotas to produce sample proportions that differed systematically from the population. George Gallup was most interested in predicting elections, so he drew samples representing each population segment in proportion to the votes that segment usually cast in elections. Because Southerners, African Americans, and women turned out at low rates in this period, these groups were deliberately underrepresented in opinion polls. For example, the 1940 census found that 50% of the adult U.S. population was female, 9% was African American, and 25% lived in the South. By contrast, a December 1940 Gallup poll included only 33% women, 3% African Americans, and 12% Southerners.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Gallup data that scholars use to represent the voice of the mass public comes from a skewed sample of that public.

The practice of quota sampling also introduced unintended distortions. Apart from the necessity of fulfilling certain demographic quotas, interviewers were given wide latitude in selecting which citizens to interview. Since interviewers preferred to work in safer areas and tended to survey approachable respondents, the "public" they interviewed often differed markedly from the actual public. For example, the 1940 census indicated that about 11% of the population had at least some college education, whereas almost 30% of a typical 1940 Gallup sample had attended college. Similarly, polls conducted by Gallup and Roper tended to include a greater proportion of "professionals" than the census estimate. The skew in these variables is not surprising, given that education and occupation were not quota categories. It is likely that the highly educated and professionals were more willing to be inter-

viewed, and that, as a result, these groups comprise a disproportionately large share of these samples.

Partly as a result of concerns about early sampling methods, most of the early public opinion surveys have not been touched for almost 60 years. Some researchers—most notably Page and Shapiro (1992)—have used the aggregate poll data to study patterns of stability and change in public opinion, but such work is the exception rather than the rule. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson's (2002) pathbreaking study of macropolitical trends begins its examination in the early 1950s. Furthermore, contemporary studies of individual-level behavior using poll data collected before 1952 are rare (but see Baum and Kernell 2001; Caldeira 1987; Schlozman and Verba 1979; Verba and Schlozman 1977; Weatherford and Sergeev 2000).

Beyond sampling concerns, scholars have generally avoided using early surveys because the datasets are often in poor shape, containing numerous miscodings and other errors. In addition, some codebooks do not include the codes necessary to decipher important questions, such as the respondent's occupation and education. As a result, scholars interested in such phenomena as the New Deal realignment, ethnic voting patterns, and the public's policy mood have been forced to rely primarily on state- and county-level election results. Unfortunately, such aggregate data cannot tell us why certain types of voters favored Democrats while others favored Republicans. The historical study of mass political behavior promises to enhance our understanding of the interplay between public opinion and elite policymaking. Fulfilling this promise requires us to capitalize on available individual-level data.

In this article, we briefly describe the data and the weights that we have developed to address the limitations introduced by quota sampling. We then present a series of figures that track aggregate public opinion on selected questions that were repeated 10 or more times in surveys conducted between 1936 and 1945. These series suggest the potential for developing a new generation of public opinion scholarship that brings this pivotal era in American politics back into dialogue with contemporary studies of political behavior.

#### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SURVEYS

Early opinion polls covered a wide range of topics and provide a treasure trove of insights into the dynamics of public opinion and political behavior. For example, most Gallup polls asked about presidential vote intention or recent presidential vote choice, with little variation in question wording. Congressional vote was included in about one-quarter of the polls. Presidential approval was included in over 70 polls between 1936 and 1945, again with little variation in wording. Gallup polls also asked a party identification question at least 39 times between 1937 and 1945.

The surveys also included numerous questions probing respondents' domestic policy attitudes. For decades, historians and political scientists have debated the sources of the halt of New Deal liberalism and the reasons that a conservative coalition of southern Democrats and Republicans rose to prominence in the U.S. Congress while Britain and other advanced democracies were moving toward a more comprehensive welfare state (see, e.g., Farhang and Katznelson 2005; Brinkley 1995). On the whole, this literature has been largely divorced from the study of public opinion and mass political behavior. We believe that changes in mass attitudes—in particular, concerns about the growing influence of labor unions—played an important role in defining the limits of

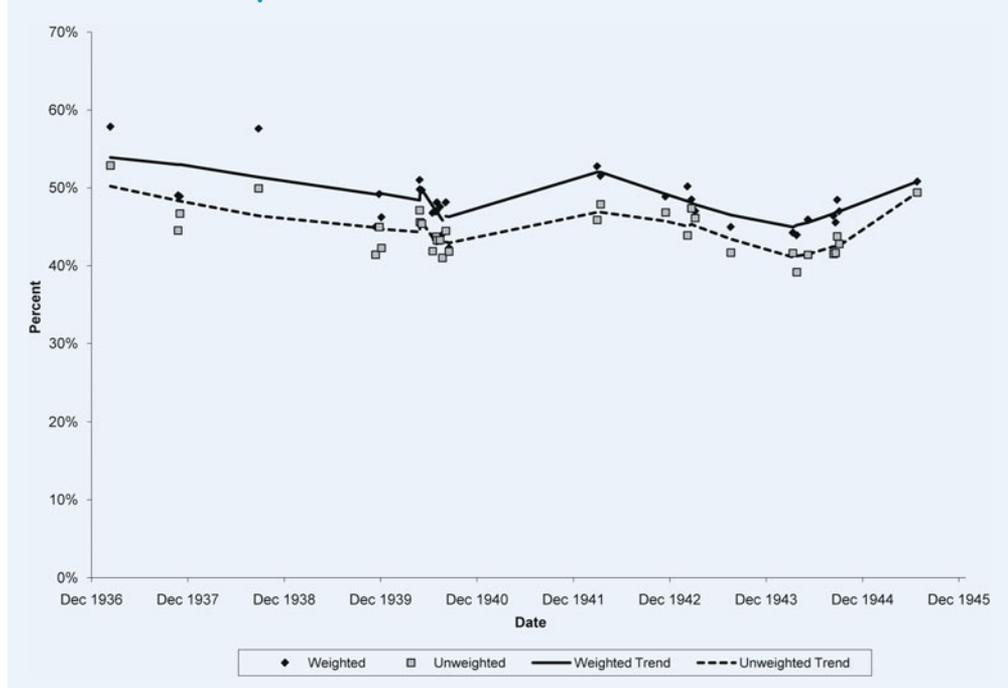
New Deal liberalism (Schickler and Pearson 2009; Schickler and Caughey 2010). These new data promise to put such claims to a clearer test. For example, a series of polls investigated attitudes toward labor unions, including approval of the sit-down strikes of 1937, concerns about wartime strikes, and views on the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and American Federation of Labor (AFL) leadership. An item asking whether the landmark Wagner Act of 1935 should be “revised, repealed, or stay unchanged” was repeated six times in polls during the early 1940s, as anti-union proposals were high on the congressional agenda. The surveys also included questions about respondents’ more general attitudes toward New Deal liberalism, such as whether

the New Deal ought to be extended to new policy areas, kept unchanged, or reversed. Gallup, OPOR, and NORC polls also included numerous questions tracking public reactions to the domestic side of the war effort, such as price controls, as well as questions about proposals for postwar expansion of the welfare state. For example, an August 1944 NORC survey asked over 2,500 Americans a series of questions about their medical expenses, health insurance status, and views on what the government should do to improve access to medical care (see Mickey and Schickler 2008).

In addition, a host of surveys allow us to explore the public’s attitude toward foreign relations. These surveys open new paths into well-trod fields of inquiry. While a number of political scientists have conducted systematic studies of public opinion concerning international interventions (Foyle 1999; Holsti 2004; Mueller 1973; Mueller 1994; Sobel 2001), these analyses have focused on the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, almost completely ignoring World War II. Berinsky (2007; 2009) has explored the structure of support for war and found that in many ways, World War II was a war like any other. For instance, before U.S. entry into the war, Democrats who paid close attention to politics were more willing to adopt Roosevelt’s aggressive foreign policy position and argue that the United States should risk war to aid the Allied countries. As Republicans’ level of attention to elite discourse increased, on the other hand, they became less likely to support aiding the Allies. However, once the United States entered World War II in December 1941, elite discourse unified behind the president. Regardless of an individual’s political predispositions, citizens with higher levels of political information expressed greater support for administration policies than did citizens with less information. As in other areas of politics, a unified government led to a unified public.

In sum, the public opinion data from the 1930s and 1940s hold great promise for illuminating scores of vital questions in the field

Figure 1  
Democratic Party Affiliation



of political behavior. But can the data be trusted? It is to this question that we turn next.

#### QUOTA SAMPLING AND WEIGHTS

The central problem in interpreting frequencies on variables of interest is that many of the survey samples do not represent certain groups in proportion to their population share. But although the quota-controlled sample data were collected in ways that appear haphazard from a modern vantage point, the data collection process introduced predictable deviations between the characteristics of the sample and that of the population. We can therefore employ methods designed to account for these measurable differences to make reasonable inferences about the U.S. population. Berinsky (2006) describes these methods in greater detail.

The present study employed a model-based poststratification weighting scheme.<sup>4</sup> We preferred to use cell weighting, because this approach is simple and requires minimal assumptions. When possible, the aggregate opinion results presented in this article were weighted through the cell-weighting method. In some cases (see the following), we used raking methods. It should be noted that researchers employing these different weighting methods will produce similar pictures of the shape of public opinion from this era (see Berinsky 2006 for examples and details).

In aggregate analysis, we weighted the data on education levels, occupation, phone access, and quota category variables such as gender and region that could be matched to census data. When education levels were available, we created cell weights using education, gender, region, and (if available) race.<sup>5</sup> If the survey did not contain a measure of education, we created cell weights using a dummy variable for “professional” occupation, gender, region, and (if available) race. If neither education nor a reliable occupation variable was available, we created raking weights based on the marginals of gender, region, phone access, and race (when

available). The necessary population counts for the 1940 census were drawn from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (Ruggles et al. 2004), and aggregate census records of phone access were drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's (1975) *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*. Even when weighting made only a modest difference in our conclusions, it nonetheless provides more confidence that our estimates are not attributable to problematic sample design.

**OPINION TREND DATA**

To demonstrate the temporal richness and promise of the data, we present a series of figures that chart the data on certain questions that were repeatedly asked during this period. We list the question wordings for these items in the appendix. For series for which we had at least 15 measures of opinion, we present smoothed trend lines along with the individual data points.<sup>6</sup> For the other data series, we present the individual data points connected by interpolated lines.

One important question to answer is how our weighting changes the picture of public opinion in earlier times. To demonstrate the effects of weighting, we first present two time trends. The first, party identification (figure 1), is a case in which the use of weights shifts the distribution of opinion, increasing the estimate of Democratic Party identification by an average of 4%. This result is not surprising, because Southerners tended to identify with the Democratic Party and were significantly underrepresented in the polls from the 1930s and 1940s. However, our weights do not always alter estimates of public opinion. On questions relating to the use of military force, the sampling problems in the early polls produced biases that often largely offset one another: Southerners and women were both underrepresented, but the former tended to favor intervention, while the latter were more dovish. We can see this trend clearly on questions

Figure 2  
Every Able-Bodied Man Should Serve in the Armed Forces

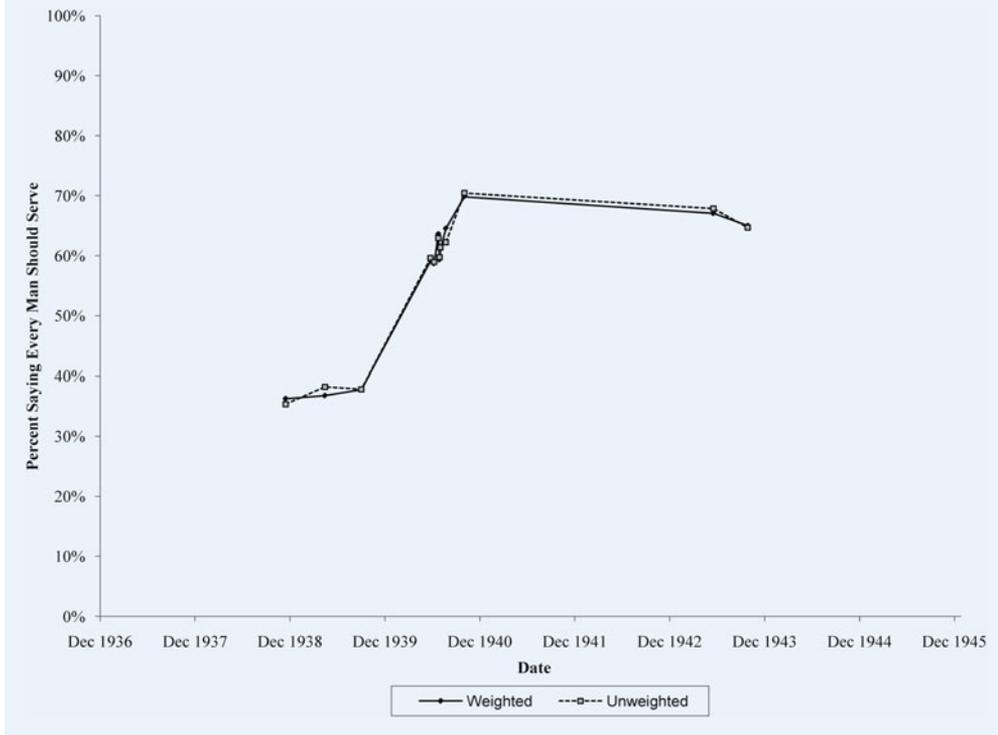
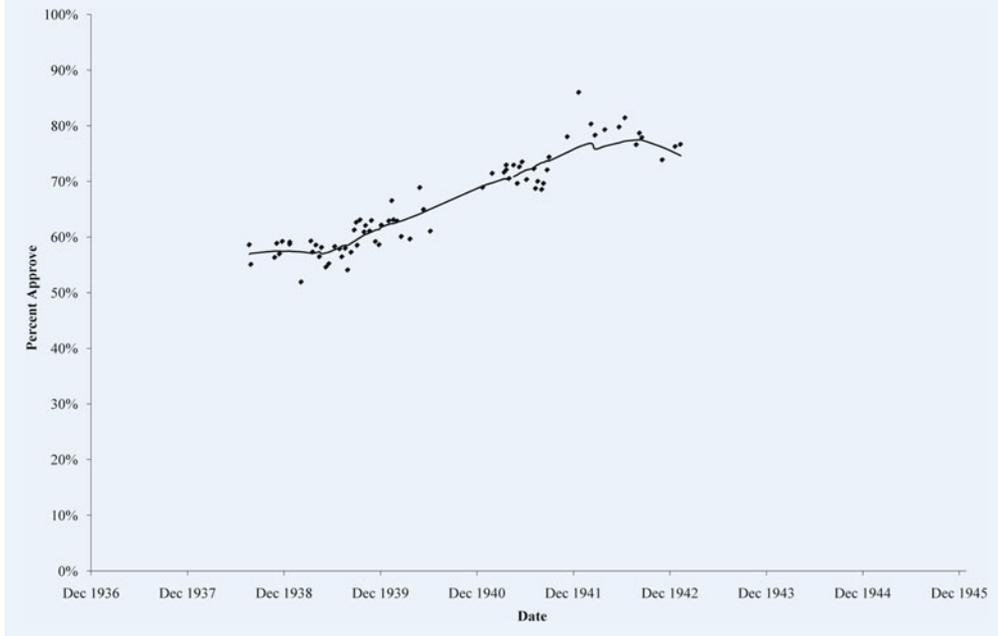


Figure 3  
Presidential Approval



concerning opinion on the draft, presented in figure 2. The unweighted marginals turn out to be close to the mark, but only because the sampling problems led to biases in opposite directions. For example, weighting responses to the draft question never changes the aggregate support by more than half a point, and, on average, the unweighted support for compulsory service is the

Figure 4  
Support for Unions

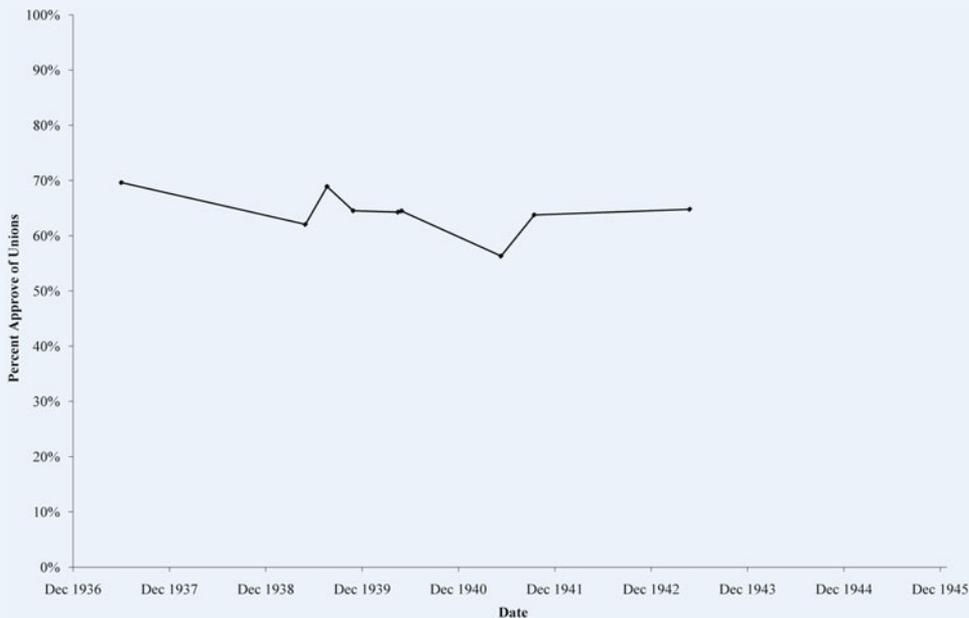
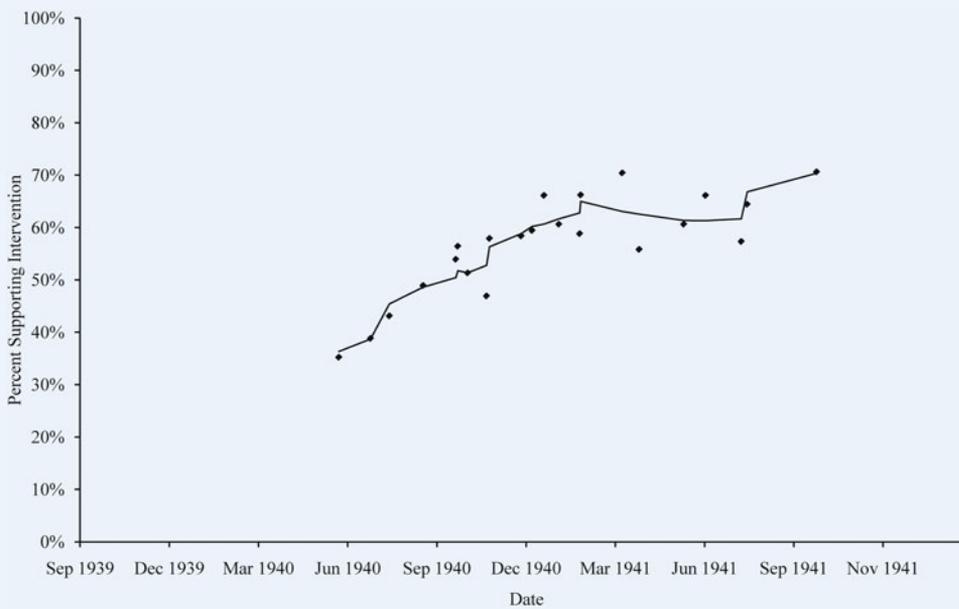


Figure 5  
Support for Helping England over Staying out of the War



same as the weighted estimate.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in both the case of party identification and military intervention, the weighted and unweighted marginals vary over time in almost identical ways. Thus, while the use of weights affects the marginal distribution of some of the variables in our datasets, the effect of these weights is largely consistent over time. Thus, for the other series presented here, we present only the weighted trends.

Figures 3, 4, and 5 expand our scope to three other survey trends from the 1930s and 1940s: presidential approval, support for helping England, and support for unions. A few points are worth

noting here. First, many of the data series are quite rich. For instance, the presidential approval question was asked 76 times during this time period. Some of the issue questions also allow us to trace changes in opinion over time. The “help England” question, for instance, was asked 23 times in 1940 and 1941. Second, the time series seem to move in meaningful ways. For instance, reflecting the growing elite consensus about the importance of helping England in the year before Pearl Harbor, the “help England” series rises over time.

Most important, these data allow scholars to examine the political significance of changes in opinion during the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, the data speak to the debate over macro-partisanship, which in the past has been limited to surveys from 1953 onwards. A substantial increase in Roosevelt’s approval rating from 1938 through the end of 1941 is evident (see figure 3). This sustained increase, which coincided with the rise of the war issue on the national agenda, corresponds to much less—if any—movement in Democratic partisanship (see figure 1). Roosevelt’s approval peaks soon after Pearl Harbor but then enters a slow decline, although the rating does remain above the levels of the late 1930s. A year after Pearl Harbor, his rating still stood at approximately 75%, reflecting a roughly 20-point increase over his 1938 approval rating and a 15-point increase over his typical ratings in late 1939. By comparison, Democratic Party identification stood at about 50% in late 1942, which is barely above the party’s standing in 1938–39. Democratic identification appears to fall slightly in 1943 and early 1944, but by the time of Roosevelt’s 1944 reelection, it once again stands at approximately 50%.

Turning to the domain of domestic policy, while the “support for unions” series (figure 4) shows that most Americans expressed basic support for unions in principle, actual support dropped by about 10 points from 1937 to early 1941 before rebounding slightly during the war. We suspect that the other questions, which measure attitudes toward the Wagner Act and wartime strikes for shorter

periods of time, might provide greater insight into the dynamics of mass attitudes toward labor. Indeed, the 10-point decline in abstract support for unionization corresponds to a period in which the polls indicated considerable popular disapproval of union tactics, such as the emergent sit-down strike movement of 1937 and strikes occurring in the defense industries in the run-up to the war (see Schickler and Caughey 2010).

In the realm of foreign policy opinion, the most noteworthy pattern is the massive increase in support for interventionist policies in the years before Pearl Harbor. Majority support for the policy of helping England, even at the risk of war with Germany, was attained during the 1940 election and continued to rise before Pearl Harbor (see figure 5; for further discussion, see Berinsky 2009). This increase in support can also be seen in the trends regarding support for instituting a draft. Support for the notion that all able-bodied men ought to serve in the armed services doubled from 1939 to early 1941 (see figure 2).

### FUTURE RESEARCH

The survey questions about presidential approval, vote choice, and union support, and the foreign policy series discussed here are only a small fraction of the questions available in the database. Extensive series also exist on topics ranging from racial politics to economic conditions, congressional vote choice, court packing, social welfare policy, labor policy, war, and prohibition. We present several of these additional series in an online appendix, available at <http://igs.berkeley.edu/schickler/docs/publicopinion30s40s.pdf>. We hope that this brief review of certain time trends sparks interest in opinion poll data from the 1930s and 1940s. As scholars and journalists consider the possibility that a deep economic crisis will again redraw the contours of American politics, the rich data that exists on public opinion in an earlier economic crisis can serve as a useful point of departure in considering public responses to bold economic experiments. We hope that scholars in a variety of fields will use this understudied resource to more deeply investigate this important period and help shed light on new theories of politics and public opinion. ■

### NOTES

Financial support for this study was provided by the National Science Foundation, Political Science Program Grants SES-0550431 and SES-0646043.

1. Conservative commentator George Will recently cited Gallup data from 1936, purporting to show that most Democrats believed Roosevelt was moving the country too far to the left, even as the incumbent Roosevelt won reelection in a landslide over Alf Landon (see Jacobson 2010 for discussion of this claim).
2. Individual-level data for the 1935 polls conducted by Gallup and Roper-Fortune have not been recovered, but we do have individual-level Gallup data starting in 1936 and Roper data starting in 1938.
3. These figures are computed using respondents aged 21 years or older. The Gallup data come from AIPO #225. These figures are typical of polls conducted through the early 1940s that we examined. By the mid-1940s, however, Gallup had adjusted his gender quotas to include equal numbers of men and women. This change in the composition of the sample makes it difficult to track real changes in opinion over time using the raw survey marginals.
4. The poststratification weights we employ are different from probability weights, which are known at the time the survey is designed and are used to adjust for nonconstant probability of sample inclusion. It is not possible to employ probability weights for the quota samples we examine here.
5. We include race as a separate weighting category for those surveys with samples including at least 20 African Americans. When race is used as a weighting variable for the purposes of creating cell weights, whites are weighted using the full stratification table (gender by region by occupation/education), while blacks are only weighted on the basis of gender, because of small sample sizes. In some cases (most notably, the OPOP surveys conducted after 1942), there were no blacks in the sample. In those cases, race is ignored as a weighting variable, and the surveys are weighted to the census data of the full population of blacks and whites

in the United States. When the sampling scheme excludes a group, such as African Americans, considerable care is necessary in interpreting even the weighted results, particularly for those series that include some surveys in which blacks were interviewed and others in which they were not interviewed.

6. We created these series using a Lowess smoother, employing Cleveland's tricube weighting function and with a bandwidth of 30% of the data.
7. While we know at some level of generality how the surveys were conducted, we lack sufficient information about the sampling design to report reliable standard errors. It may be possible to construct empirical confidence intervals using items that were repeated in many of the surveys. For example, phone ownership was recorded in all but a handful of cases; other demographic variables that should only move a little over time are also available for analysis. Summarizing the distribution of these variables across surveys might provide some bounds for variance estimates—a step we plan to take in future research. It is also worth mentioning that many of the surveys have large sample sizes—in some cases, in excess of 3,000 respondents.

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