My work seeks to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the opinions of members of the mass public and the policies of government by systematically exploring public opinion and behavior across a variety of different historical, political, and national contexts. Over the past seven years, I have explored four related aspects of the political behavior of ordinary citizens: First, whose opinions are reflected in public opinion polls and how do these polls affect policy? Second, how do electoral institutions foster or stifle citizen involvement in the political process? Third, how does the political and social context of a society shape the attitudes and opinions of ordinary citizens? Finally, how do citizens understand complex issues of foreign policy and then guide and react to the government’s policies of military intervention.

Taken together, my work illuminates the role that members of the mass public can play in shaping the policies and practices of government. Under some circumstances, the arguments advanced by politicians and the norms that govern discussion of sensitive topics determine the shape of public opinion. Under other circumstances, citizens can find their own political voice. By drawing on group interests and political stereotypes, for instance, individuals can navigate the links between their personal situation and ongoing political controversies. To assess the quality and capacity of public opinion, we must account for the biases and inequality of political voice that may arise through interactions of ordinary citizens and political elites.

Opinion Polls and Political Representation

Opinion polls have become a critical mechanism for communicating information between the mass public and political elites. In a series of journal articles and a book manuscript entitled *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Representation in America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), I consider how faithfully the “voice of the people”– information concerning the wants, needs, and desires of ordinary citizens – is transmitted through opinion polls to the government officials responsible for making and implementing policy. Despite their shortcomings, the conception that opinion polls are broadly representative of public sentiment has long pervaded academic and popular discussions of surveys. However, I demonstrate that the cognitive and social operations employed in answering survey questions may distort public opinion in predictable and politically consequential ways. I focus on those respondents who agree to participate in a survey but do not answer particular questions on that survey. Examining public opinion with regard to some of the most important issues of our time – racial policy, the scope of the social welfare state, and attitudes toward war – I find that citizen decisions about whether to have an opinion, and whether to reveal that opinion to pollsters, introduces significant and predictable biases into the results of opinion surveys.

The debate over policies designed to ensure racial equality has defined the nature of political conflict in the US for a generation. I found that some individuals who harbor racially conservative sentiments are likely to mask their socially unacceptable opinions by abstaining from questions about race. Such actions ensure that a racially conservative base of opinion is
not fully reflected in opinion polls. Using data from the 1990s, I find that public opinion polls overstate support for policies designed to ensure school integration and fair employment practices. But I also show that these findings are a product of the social and political environment surrounding questions of race in the present day. In the early 1970s, when the social norms restricting discussions of race were less developed, these effects were absent (AJPS 1999; JOP 2002; Princeton University Press 2004).

On social welfare policy, I demonstrate that inequalities in the distribution of politically relevant resources coupled with the larger political culture surrounding social welfare policy issues in general are disadvantageous to groups naturally supportive of the welfare state. These supporters – the economically disadvantaged and those who support principles of political equality – are less easily able to form coherent opinions on social welfare policies than citizens with higher incomes, more education, and commitments to principles of limited government. Those citizens predisposed to champion the maintenance of welfare state programs are, as a result, less likely to articulate opinions on surveys. Thus, public opinion on social welfare policy controversies gives disproportionate weight to respondents opposed to expanding the government’s role in the economy, mirroring the patterns of inequality found in traditional forms of political participation (AJPS 2002).

In the realm of war, I use data collected by a variety of scholars to demonstrate that, in the early part of the Vietnam War, the process of collecting opinion concerning United States involvement excluded a dovish segment of the population from collective public opinion. The imbalance in political rhetoric surrounding Vietnam initially disadvantaged those groups who were inherent opponents of the war. I find, however, that this bias shrank over time as anti-war messages became more common in the public sphere.

All told, my book sounds a note of warning to those who seek to assess the voice of the people through surveys. Opinion polls are typically hailed – by supporters and critics alike – as the most egalitarian means of collecting the public’s views on the issues of the day. While opinion surveys may indeed be more egalitarian than other forms of participation, polls too may suffer from systematic inequalities of voice. Opinion polls, like any measure of public preference, are imperfect.

My book is not, however, an indictment of the survey enterprise, or of attempts to collect individuals’ opinions on the issues of the day. Instead, it is a call to understand and account for biases that arise in the collection of public opinion. To measure the public’s will more accurately, we should pay closer attention to just what it is that we are measuring – the interaction between individuals’ underlying sentiment and the social and political context of an issue. By integrating our knowledge of the political and social forces at work in the larger world into an understanding of the individual-level question-answering process, opinion polls may better serve the egalitarian purpose envisioned by scholars, pollsters and politicians.

Since the publication of Silent Voices, I have extended my study to explore the significance of survey abstention in Russia. Joshua Tucker and I examined the effect of non-response on opinions concerning economic reform in the mid-1990s (Communist and Post-Communist Studies 2006). The results of this study were congruent with my findings concerning social welfare policy in the United States. We found that Russians who failed to answer survey questions
tended to be more supportive of redistributive economic policies than their counterparts who were able to answer such questions. These findings indicate that survey abstention is a source of consistent disenfranchisement; in both the Russian and American cases, the “silent voices” seem to desire more state intervention in the economy than their more vocal counterparts.¹

Electoral Institutions and Political Equality

In a second line of research, I have extended my study of inequality in political voice from opinion polls to the electoral arena. In the last three decades, a number of reforms have been enacted in the United States designed to increase turnout by easing restrictions on the casting of ballots. Both proponents and opponents of electoral reforms agree that these reforms should increase the demographic representativeness of the electorate by reducing the direct costs of voting, thereby increasing turnout among less-privileged groups. These groups, presumably, are most sensitive to the costs of coming to the polls. In fact, these reforms have been greatly contested because both major political parties believe that increasing turnout among less-privileged groups will benefit Democratic politicians. However, contrary to expectations, the wave of electoral reforms may have increased turnout slightly, but has not had the hypothesized partisan effects. Electoral reforms, however, have had a significant – if unintended – effect; they have magnified the existing socio-economic biases in the composition of the electorate.

In “Who Votes by Mail” (POQ 2001), I conducted original research to study the effect of vote-by-mail (VBM) procedures on voter turnout in Oregon. Contrary to current studies of the effects of VBM systems, I find not only that VBM raises turnout, but that it also increases, rather than diminishes, the resource stratification of the electorate. The reason for this counter-intuitive finding is that reforms designed to make voting easier, such as VBM, ensure that citizens who are most engaged with the political world continue to participate. Thus VBM encourages the retention of likely voters from election to election rather than encouraging new voters to enter the electorate.

In “The Perverse Consequences of Electoral Reform in the United States” (APR 2005) I extended my focus past VBM to include other electoral laws. I review evidence from numerous studies of electoral reform and demonstrate that all reforms designed to make it easier for registered voters to cast their ballots – not just VBM – actually increase, rather than reduce, socioeconomic biases in the composition of the voting public. No matter how low the direct costs to casting a ballot are set, the only way to eliminate socioeconomic biases in the voting population is to increase the engagement of the broader mass public with the political world. Political information and interest, not the high tangible costs of the act of voting, are the real barriers to a truly democratic voting public.

¹ I have also authored a broad review essay on survey non-response for the Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research.
Political Context and Public Opinion

A third line of research, arising from my work on the effects of social norms on racial policy opinions in the United States, concerns the effects of political context on public opinion more generally. I have pursued several projects related to this theme.

The first paper extends my work on the measurement of public opinion on politically sensitive topics. In my paper, “Can We Talk? Self-Presentation and the Survey Response,” (*Political Psychology* 2004) I study how the interaction of the personality characteristics of individuals with social norms may affect the answers they give to questions on controversial political topics. In 2000, I conducted a survey, which asked the respondent to give their opinion on a number of sensitive topics, such as feelings towards blacks and homosexuals. The survey also included question batteries measuring psychological concepts related to self-presentation. These items have never before been asked on a national-sample survey. I find that the self-presentation personality characteristics of respondents influence the answers they give to sensitive questions. Specifically, I find that concern with self-presentation is a significant predictor of racial liberalism and expressed tolerance towards homosexuals. In future work, I hope to extend my research to examine how these effects might be conditioned by the political views of the respondents.

The second paper, coauthored with Tali Mendleberg, “The Indirect Effects of Discredited Stereotypes in Judgments of Jewish Leaders” (*AJPS* 2005) examines the impact of beliefs about social groups on political attitudes. We argue that stereotypes of ethnic groups can have an indirect impact on voters’ judgments even if voters explicitly reject those stereotypes. We look at the case of Jewish leaders, and hypothesize that acceptable political stereotypes – the notion that Jews are liberal – are linked in voters’ minds to unacceptable social stereotypes – the belief that Jews are “shady.” Consequently, a cue to the candidate’s shadiness works indirectly by increasing the perception that the candidate is liberal, even as the shady cue is rejected. Using three national survey-experiments we randomly varied a candidate’s Jewish identity, ideology, and shadiness. The cue to the rejected social stereotype indeed activates the more legitimate political stereotype. Moreover, voters give more weight to the candidate’s perceived liberalism in their evaluation. Consequently, the candidate’s support suffers. However, when the candidate takes an extreme ideological position on issues, the effects disappear. The indirect influences of discredited stereotypes, and the limits of those stereotypes, have important implications for our understanding of voting and of the legacies of discrimination.

Finally, I have extended my work from the United States to Eastern Europe with a study of the effect of the economic environment on opinions concerning European integration. In “Transitional Winners and Losers” (*AJPS* 2002), my co-authors and I posit that European Union membership is tantamount to a guarantee that market reforms of the transition period will not be reversed. Thus, attitudes towards the EU are likely to be determined by whether one has been a “winner” or “loser” during the transition and by one’s attitude towards the free market. We test this theory using data from ten post-communist countries and find support for our hypotheses. The article concludes by speculating about the role that attitudes towards EU membership may play in the development of partisan preferences.
Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

I am currently involved in two new projects, both of which extend my research into how ordinary citizens interact with political systems on issues of foreign policy. The first line of work explores how citizens develop an understanding of the political world. I employ methods and concepts from cognitive science and examine how citizens use issue “frames” – the central organizing themes or story lines of politics – to comprehend complex political issues. I began with an exploration of public understanding of the 1999 NATO military intervention in Kosovo in a paper co-authored with Donald Kinder (JOP 2006), “Making Sense of Issues through Media Frames: Understanding the Kosovo Crisis.” In 2000 and 2002, I ran a series of experiments where I presented all subjects with the same information about the Kosovo crisis (word for word), but varied the presentation of issue “frame” – the definition of what that crisis was about. For some subjects, I used subject headers and structured the syntax to highlight the humanitarian crisis involving the ethnic Albanians. For other subjects, I drew attention to the dangers the intervention posed to U.S. troops. I found that subjects exposed to different frames came to different understandings of the Kosovo crisis. Specifically subjects in the different conditions remembered different facts about the stories and grouped terms related to the Kosovo crisis in somewhat different ways. We are currently studying the public’s reaction to the events of 9/11.

The second and more significant project is a study of public opinion and war with a particular focus on World War II. The roots and origins of public opinion during World War II remain understudied despite the fact that there is a great deal of data concerning the public’s view of the war effort and other major issues of the day.

One reason these polls remain untapped may be that the data itself is difficult to work with. The datasets contain miscoded responses and other errors. Without a great deal of preparatory work, the data are unusable for analysis. Another equally troublesome issue is that the quota sampling methods employed in gathering this data were unscientific. Quota sampling methods often underrepresented groups such as African Americans, women, Southerners, and those with low education. While historians have accepted these polls as the “voice of the people,” political scientists have largely rejected these polls as unusable due to their problematic sample design.

I have remedied these problems by cleaning and recoding over 450 datasets and developing methods appropriate for analyzing quota sampled opinion data. The recoding project has been undertaken in conjunction with Eric Schickler. We have secured funding from NSF to complete the data management project over the next two years. I have also advanced methods for analyzing this data in “Public Opinion in the 1930s and 1940s: The Analysis of Quota Controlled Sample Survey Data” (which has been conditionally accepted by Public Opinion Quarterly). The project will provide to the community of scholars a wealth of individual-level opinion data in the pre-1950 era, allowing researchers to gain new insights into an array of substantively important topics. My work with Schickler therefore promises to expand the field of political behavior by promoting the study of historical public opinion, bringing together historical and behavioral studies of politics in new ways.
I have used these data and methods to study how the mass public guided and reacted to foreign policy decisions during World War II in my book manuscript, *America at War: Public Opinion during Wartime, From World War II to Iraq*. In this book, I take a fresh approach to the much-tilled field of public opinion and war. Given the importance of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, it is not surprising that the study of war and public opinion is a flourishing industry within political science. Scholars have conducted systematic studies of individual conflicts and series of wars in an attempt to determine what it is that leads citizens to rally to war or to reject an internationalist position. But, for reasons discussed above, modern treatments of public opinion and war have almost entirely ignored World War II.

This book is an attempt to fill the gaping hole in our knowledge of public opinion and war. In advancing a general theory of public opinion and war, I address a number of conflicts in American history, but maintain a particular focus on World War II. This book therefore brings our understanding of the dynamics of a conflict that was in many ways a unique effort into the general study of public opinion and war, thereby enriching both our knowledge of that war and our general understanding of how public opinion is forged in times of crisis. I make use of the rich trove of opinion data discussed above, but I also draw upon polls from familiar contemporary cases. The conflicts I study range from relatively minor military interventions – like the 1999 Kosovo conflict – to large scale wars spanning many years – like World War II and Vietnam. Though these wars differ in many respects, I find common patterns in the organization of public opinion during wartime that can change our understanding of public opinion in both the foreign and domestic arenas.

Many scholars and politicians subscribe to the “casualties hypothesis,” which holds that, as war deaths mount, it is impossible for political elites to maintain the public consent they need to wage war. Contrary to this conventional wisdom, I find that public opinion during times of crisis – and during war in particular – is shaped by many of the same attachments and enmities found on the domestic stage. The public might be briefly influenced by dramatic events, such as Pearl Harbor and 9/11, but – as in the domestic arena – public opinion is primarily structured by the ebb and flow of partisan and group-based political conflict. For instance, I find that the conventional wisdom concerning the central role of casualties in determining support for war is incorrect. I find that changes in discourse among political actors, not battlefield events are the key to explaining trends in popular support for war. By allowing for heterogeneous responses to the tides of war and by explicitly allowing a role for the elite mediation of foreign events, we can better understand how citizens in democracies can guide and constrain the government’s ability to wage war. Together, my analyses of data from World War II and Iraq – two conflicts that, in many ways, differ in their particulars – led to a single conclusion; the nature of elite discourse on war has a profound influence on the shape of public opinion. By revisiting faulty lessons from World War II and drawing on seemingly disparate survey evidence from an over 60-year era of American involvement in international affairs, I draw broader conclusions about the roots of public attitudes toward foreign policy. In doing so, I provide a coherent understanding of public opinion during times of crisis that brings together several disparate lines of research in the fields of International Relations and American Politics.
I have completed 4 of the 7 chapters of this manuscript, which is currently under review at the University of Chicago Press and Princeton University Press. I expect to sign an advance contract with one of these presses in September. I will complete the book manuscript in the summer of 2007.