concluding with a review of the ways in which public opinion researchers try to observe that process as it unfolds over time.

2. Problems of Public Opinion

Many writers on public opinion begin, reasonably enough, by posing the basic question of What exactly do we mean by public opinion? Any search for a single, clear definition of the concept will, however, prove fruitless. In an entry on public opinion research prepared for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Davison (1968) noted that there is “no generally accepted definition” of the term (p. 188). The absence is certainly not for any lack of effort. Noelle-Neumann (1984) points out that “generations of philosophers, jurists, historians, political theorists, and journalism scholars have torn their hair in the attempt to provide a clear definition” (p. 58). Childs (1965) was able to compile four dozen different accounts of the meaning of public opinion, observing that the literature of the field is “strewn with zealous attempts” (p. 14).

To admit that an acceptable general definition of the concept is probably out of reach, however, is certainly not to say that public opinion is in any sense meaningless. The concept continues to be used in research, in writings about government, and in explanations of human social behavior, both scientific and otherwise. And the fact of its continued use stands as firm testimony to its meaningfulness. To understand the concept of public opinion, we ought to inquire about the various problems to which the concept has been applied. Rather than to arrive at any single definition of public opinion, our goal is to understand its different uses. As Kaplan (1964) noted, “The meaning of a term is a family affair among its various senses” (p. 48).

The problems that originally gave rise to the concept of public opinion are not necessarily the same problems that sustain its use today. Yet there are many common themes that run through writings on public opinion, spanning several centuries. The aim of this chapter is thus twofold. First, I review the historical origins of public opinion as a concept, taking note of the various ways in which the idea was applied in formulating democratic models of society in the 18th and 19th centuries. Then moving forward in time, I discuss the close relationship between interest in the new force of public opinion in society and the expansive growth of the mass media during the late 19th and 20th centuries, paying particular attention to some recurring worries and fears about the status of modern public opinion. As we will see in subsequent chapters, many contemporary research applications not only share the conceptual legacy of public opinion as it has evolved historically, they also continue to reflect the same fundamental worries about its soundness.

Origins of the Idea

The concept of public opinion is largely a product of the Enlightenment. The idea is closely wedded to liberal political philosophies of the late 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., Locke, 1690/1963; Rousseau, 1762/1968) and especially 19th-century democratic theory (e.g., Bentham, 1838/1962). Although it is not my intention here to conduct a thorough historical review of the development of the concept of public opinion—and certainly not my goal to review the course of political philosophy—it is nonetheless useful to review the original ways in which the term was used.¹

*Anticipations and approximations.* Although the concept was not explicitly propounded until the 18th century, many earlier writings included “anticipations and approximations of modern theorizing about public opinion” (Palmer, 1936, p. 231). The political philosophy of ancient Greece, for example, dealt with the pitfalls and potential benefits of popular rule. Plato readily disparaged democratic politics, seeing philosophy as the rightful director of human affairs and questioning the competence of any large number of people to deliberate philosophical concerns. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that the collective sentiments of the *demos* could contribute a sort of common sense to political affairs (Minar, 1960, pp. 38-39). In spite of references in classical works to phenomena that resemble public opinion, however, the modern distinctions between the state and society at large and between specialized officials and the general public were not actually a part of the
political philosophy of Athens (Held, 1987, pp. 17-18). The combination of the terms opinion and public into a compound concept having political significance appears only much later, in the liberal and democratic philosophies of the 1700s.

Early conceptions of opinion. Well before its casting in liberal and democratic terms, there were in general two discernible senses of the word opinion, which persist even today (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 89-90). The first sense is essentially epistemological and stems from its use in distinguishing a matter of judgment from a matter of fact, or something uncertain from something known to be true, either by demonstration or by faith. This notion—taken from the Latin expression opinio and perhaps the earliest sense of the term—is still reflected in general use today, as when someone refers to a particular assertion as “a matter of opinion” rather than a point of fact (see Hume, 1777/1975 on the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact). When linked to society at large, the term sometimes takes on a pejorative quality, reflected in such early expressions as “common opinion,” “general opinion,” and “vulgar opinion” (the latter incorporating the Latin vulgus, meaning “the common people, the mob”). Despite its sometimes negative connotations, opinion used in this epistemological manner essentially relates to a cognitive state, to a lower form of knowing.

A second, related sense of opinion, by some contemporary accounts more closely connected to its modern connotations, equates it with manners, morals, and customs (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, 1984). Here the emphasis is on the role of popular opinion as a kind of informal social pressure and social control. Opinion is equated with reputation, esteem, and the general regard of others, of interest principally because it constrains human behavior (Speier, 1950, p. 378). This understanding of opinion eventually became crystallized in the writings of Locke (1690/1975), who identified three general laws that govern human conduct: the divine law, the civil law, and the “law of opinion or reputation” (which he elsewhere called the “law of fashion” and the “law of private censure”). Rather than casting opinion as a way of knowing, this sense of the term focuses on social approbation or censure—opinion as a way of informally condoning or condemning. Opinion, seen in this light, is generally prejudicial and nonrational, akin to sentiment as opposed to reason (Ozouf, 1988, pp. S1-S2).

Early conceptions of public. The term public had many different senses in early usage, but here again we can point to two in particular that are worthy of note. The Latin phrase publicus was most likely derived from populus or populus, meaning “the people.” But there were at least two distinct reflections of the people present in early uses of the word public. In one sense of the term, public referred to common access, as in a “public place.” According to Habermas (1962/1989, p. 6), the res publica was any property generally open to the population, and in feudal times the commons was regarded as public because general access was provided to the fountain and market square. The fundamental concept is one of openness or availability. Much the same notion is still in use today, as when we employ the verb publicize to refer to the process of making something widely available.

Perhaps more predominant was the use of the term public in reference to matters of general concern and, more specifically, to matters of office and state (Speier, 1950). This second sense of the term has little to do with common access, focusing instead on common interest or the common good. As Ozouf (1988, p. S2) points out, before the 1830s French dictionaries opposed public not to privé ("private"), but instead to particulier ("particular, individual"). The same idea persists today in references to “public works” and “public law.” A government building may be considered public, even if it is not open to everyone. Before the evolution of the contemporary concept of government, the personal accoutrements and activities of rulers were considered public. In medieval writings lordly and public were used synonymously and publicare meant to claim for the lord (Habermas, 1962/1989). Under the theory of royal absolutism, prominent in Europe before the 18th century, the monarch was considered the only public person—“the source and principle of unity in a particularistic society” (Baker, 1990). The term public later came to refer generally to the state as it evolved “into an entity having an objective existence over and against the person of the ruler” (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 11). Today, drawing largely on these early connections between the term public and the collective welfare, we can hardly avoid associating things public with things governmental.

Although the notion of public opinion did not emerge until the Enlightenment, both opinion and public carried with them before that time multiple uses that remain related to our contemporary
understanding of the concepts. Most notably, opinion was used to refer both to rational/cognitive and to nonrational/social processes—a duality carried over into virtually all subsequent writings on public opinion. The term public shared a similar dual usage. To follow the famous words of Abraham Lincoln, the word public originally meant both “of the people” (when referring to common access) and “for the people” (when referring to the common good). It only came to mean “by the people” (that is, carried out by common people, the sense in which we often think of the term today) much later.

The Birth of Public Opinion

The combination of public and opinion into a single term, used to refer to collective judgments outside the sphere of government that affect political decision making, occurred following several large-scale social, economic, and political trends in Europe (Speier, 1950; Lazarsfeld, 1957; Ginsberg, 1986). Although at least one historian credits the English with using the phrases “opinion of the people” and “opinion of the public” as early as 1741 (Gunn, 1983), the French are most often viewed as the inventors and popularizers of the concept (Habermas, 1962/1989; Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Ozouf, 1988). Noelle-Neumann (1984) credits Rousseau with first using the phrase l’opinion publique around 1744, employing it in the second sense of opinion defined above, as a reference to the social customs and manners of society (see also Baker, 1990). At any rate, by 1780 French writers were making rather extensive use of public opinion to refer to a political rather than a social phenomenon, often in conjunction with “common will” (bien public), “public spirit” (esprit public), “public conscience” (conscience publique), and other related terms (Ozouf, 1988, p. 53).

The historical forces at work had originally begun as early as the 15th century, with the advent of printing by means of movable type (Childs, 1965). This technological development allowed for the widespread dissemination of literature, which gathered strength in the 16th century with the growth of merchant and business classes and an expansion of literacy. The latter trend was greatly assisted by the Protestant Reformation, which created a broad reading public, without any formal mediation by the church, for religious literature written in the vernacular (Speier, 1950, p. 381). The professionalization of the arts, particularly literature, replaced the earlier patronage system with one in which authors and artists depended for their sustenance on popular support (Habermas, 1962/1989). Reading societies and secondhand bookstores began to flourish, and by the late 1700s political and moral literature was quite popular among the learned classes (Speier, 1950; Habermas, 1962/1989; Darnton, 1982).

The Reformation proved important for several reasons beyond its effect on the circulation of literature. The teachings of Calvin and Luther challenged the long-standing sociopolitical order of papal authority and jurisdiction. Perhaps even more critically, the Protestant teachings contained at their core a new and individualistic conception of the person. They sanctioned secular authority in all but the directly moral and religious domains of life and supported the idea that individuals are “masters of their own destinies” (Held, 1987, p. 40). By the late 17th century, the ideas first unleashed by the Reformation had evolved into more sweeping liberal philosophies (e.g., Locke, 1690/1963), which asserted that individuals should be free to follow their own preferences in all aspects of life—religious, economic, and political (Held, 1987, pp. 51-54).

Emergence of a public sphere. Habermas (1962/1989) argues that these historical trends, tied closely to the growth of capitalism and the ascendance of a European bourgeoisie, eventually resulted in a critically reasoning public sphere. Over the course of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a variety of novel social institutions came to prominence: the coffeehouses of England (there were said to be more than 2,000 in London by the early 18th century), the salons of Paris, and the table societies (Tischgesellschaften) of Germany (Speier, 1950). These gathering places, where devotion to literature and the art of conversation were held in high esteem, came to represent—particularly the French salons—places where authority of argument supplanted the authority of title. According to Habermas, the literary public of the 18th century gained political force as the bourgeoisie consolidated and began to articulate a liberal critique of the existing absolutist state, primarily through the circulation of political literature and its widespread discussion in the salons and coffeehouses. Free exchange of information and critical, open reasoning, became the instruments of “public self-assertion”
in political affairs (Nathans, 1990, p. 625). With the growth of a politically active public sphere, public opinion emerged as a new form of political authority—one with which the bourgeoisie could challenge absolute rule.

Habermas (1962/1989) emphasizes the rational and egalitarian features of public opinion during the Enlightenment (pp. 36-37). First, it is seen as emanating from reasoned discourse, from active conversation and debate. This debate is “public” in the sense that it aims at determining the common will or general good—it is not merely a clash of individual interests. The debate is also open; the process is “public” in the sense that open participation, if not entirely ensured, is desired. It is sovereign and egalitarian; it operates independently from social and economic status, giving way to the merits of ideas rather than to political power. Finally, the debate must be enlightened through full publicity of political affairs and their consequences if it is to render correct judgments. As we will see, these notions would have much to do with later, systematic attempts by sociologists (e.g., Park, 1904/1972; Blumer, 1946; Mills, 1956) to define more precisely the nature of the public as a social collective (Chapter 4). These features provided the outline of what later came to be called the “classical” model of public opinion (Berelson, 1950; Lazarsfeld, 1957), and they provide a set of standards by which public opinion, even in modern societies, is sometimes judged (see Carey, 1978; Peters, 1989).

Ambiguities in the meaning of public opinion. Habermas’s (1962/1989) account has been influential, although historians have raised questions about the accuracy of his interpretation, particularly his Marxist reading of the public sphere as an aspect of capitalist/bourgeois ascendancy (Nathans, 1990, p. 626). It is also debatable whether the egalitarian, critical, and rational features ascribed to 18th-century public opinion square well with the views of public opinion that were prevalent (particularly in France) at the time. For instance, Darnton’s (1982) analysis of 18th-century French journalism challenges the rational image of public discourse. Darnton proposes that much of the political literature that circulated in prerevolutionary France was not high-minded liberal philosophy but instead rather sensation- alist and celebrity-oriented moral criticism (“politicocpornography” is Darnton’s term) that relied on themes of sexual depravity and corruption (pp. 34-38).

Other historians have suggested that Enlightenment intellectuals were far from unqualified egalitarians (Nathans, 1990). Many were in fact deeply ambivalent about individualism and the value of open contestation in politics. Baker (1990) argues that French political thinkers in the mid-18th century were wary of the extreme liberty enjoyed by the English, which seemed to invite divisiveness, endless confrontation, and political instability. There was thus considerable reluctance to embrace the complete emancipation of the individual (Ozouf, 1988). Although Rousseau (1762/1968) argued that the common good, or “general will,” is only discernible through direct and continuous participation of free individuals debating collective choices, he did not champion the clash of individual interests. Instead, he believed that members of the public, in coming together to decide what is best for their community, surrender their private interests and concerns to the common welfare (see Pateman, 1970, p. 25; Held, 1987). The problem of how to divine public opinion out of a conflicting mass of individual opinions was a central dilemma of liberal political philosophy. The autonomy of public opinion born of reason was one solution. While vague as to exactly what public opinion was, a great many writers clearly indicated that it was not the opinion of the multitude. It was instead an “anonymous and impersonal tribunal,” a new court that had many of the same attributes—“infallibility, externality, and unity”—that characterized the old, absolutist authority (Ozouf, 1988, p. S11-S12; Baker, 1990). This notion—that public opinion transcends individual opinion and reflects an abstract, common good rather than a mere compromise of individual interests—would continue to influence thinking about public opinion well into the 20th century (e.g., Lowell, 1913, pp. 8-10; Berelson, 1950).

Those who first wrote of public opinion were rarely explicit about the group of people to which it referred. Ozouf (1988, p. S6) suggests that public opinion was often implicitly equated by the French with the opinion of the “men of letters,” referring to their (largely self-accor ded) role as arbiters of social and political affairs. A second “sociologically qualifiable group of bearers of opinion” were the parlements, which took the license of circulating their protests against the king in an effort to win public “enthusiasm” to their favor (p. S7). As both Ozouf (1988) and Baker (1990) point out, however, public opinion was not only invoked in the context of
criticizing the monarchy. Baker argues that the concept took hold in the wake of a gradual dissipation of absolute authority. Amid a crisis of absolutism, the French crown and its opponents together “invented and appealed to a principle of legitimacy beyond [the existing] system in order to press their competing claims” (Baker, 1990, p. 171). The public was mainly a political or ideological construct without any clear sociological referent; it provided an implicit new system of authority in which the government and its critics had to claim the judgment of public opinion to secure their respective aims. “Indeed, one can understand the conflicts of the Pre-Revolution as a series of struggles to fix the sociological referent of the concept in favor of one or another competing group” (Baker, 1990, p. 186). Habermas notwithstanding, public opinion was more than simply the instrument of a nascent bourgeoisie.

Necker, the person often credited with popularizing the phrase l'opinion publique during the 1780s, served the French crown as minister of finance (Palmer, 1936; Baker, 1990). In some ways Necker's application of the phrase is quite modern in spirit. He used the term to refer to a growing dependence of the government's financial status on the opinion of its creditors. Necker recognized that support from the French elite was necessary for success of the government's policies. Toward that end, he advocated full publicity of state activities. He published a statement of the government's accounts (the Compte Rendu of 1781), principally to calm public creditors and reassure them of the security of the national treasury (Speier, 1950; Baker, 1990). Necker may thus have been among the first to propose systematic governmental public relations. "Only fools, pure theorists, or apprentices," he observed in 1792, "fail to take public opinion into account" (cited in Palmer, 1936).

Public opinion and majority rule. Although the coffeehouses and salons of the Enlightenment gave rise to the original idea of public opinion, 18th-century writers left the concept vague in many respects. Public opinion was linked to discussion and to the free flow of information, it was supposed to reflect the common good, and it was cast as a new and powerful tribunal for checking the actions of the state. But other key aspects of our contemporary conception of public opinion find their origins in later writings on representative democracy, such as those of Madison (1788/1966) and especially the English “utilitarian” theorists Bentham (1838/1962) and Mill (1824/1937).

Writings from the 18th century that employ the term public opinion referred to social behavior generally or, when referring to its political impact, were unclear about the precise mechanisms by which it ought to influence governmental affairs. Over the course of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, however, the work of Mill and Bentham spelled out a much more formal political role for public opinion in government, cast in legislative and electoral terms. In contrast to Rousseau, these writers argued that people behave primarily to satisfy their individual desires and to avoid pain (Schumpeter, 1943; Held, 1987). Society consists then of individuals seeking to maximize their own interests and utilities. A mechanism was needed for harmonizing these disparate interests. The answer to the problem of resolving separate and conflicting interests was rule by the majority, established by regular election and plebiscite. Public opinion, in this majoritarian view, was best expressed as the “agglomerate interests of the men of the community” (Minar, 1960, p. 36). The state was to have essentially the role of umpire or referee over individuals and groups vying to maximize their interests through economic competition and free exchange. Hence “the free vote and the free market were the sine qua non” (Held, 1987, p. 67).

Minar (1960) argues that the utilitarian democratic model is the most characteristic modern outlook on public opinion, basically underlying 20th-century efforts to measure and quantify it regularly through the institution of opinion polling. The points of divergence between the utilitarian conception of public opinion and earlier Enlightenment notions lie principally in differing proposals for determining the common good. Earlier liberal thinking (e.g., Rousseau) saw public opinion as a way of realizing the common will, best discerned through continuous popular involvement in the form of reasoned and egalitarian debate. In the newer formulation, public opinion is instead resolved through a maximizing function of separate individual wills, that is, through majority rule. The idea most true to the general will gives way in the utilitarian framework to the most commonly held idea. This is not to say that active public debate was no longer part of the picture—far from it. Freedom of the press was vigorously endorsed by Bentham and Mill. Following Necker’s view, Bentham saw the press as a particularly important organ of what he called “the public opinion tribunal.” Harkening back to
notions of common opinion as social pressure, he called for the regular publicity of all government activities as a safeguard against abuses of power (Palmer, 1936, p. 245). Such views of the press anticipate in significant ways our contemporary notion of freedom of information and the modern characterization of the media as a watchdog for the public (Commission on Freedom of the Press [Commission], 1947; see also Macaulay, 1898, on the press as the fourth estate). But continuous popular involvement in debating political affairs was not in itself proposed as the best or most practical mechanism for determining the common good; instead, the resolution of popular desires rested in the choice of the majority, as expressed through regular elections.

A second consequential shift in conceptualization also accompanied majoritarian democratic philosophy. The public itself, defined vaguely in earlier writings as those members of the learned classes who frequented the coffeehouses and salons, is in the newer framework identified explicitly with the eligible electorate. Bentham argued in his later writings for universal suffrage and annual parliamentary elections to maintain close public guard over representatives—the “deputies” of the people (Pateman, 1970). The upshot was a considerable expansion in the size and heterogeneity of the “public.” Some suggest that Bentham’s model of democracy—like Rousseau’s—assumed that every citizen would be competent to form political opinions on pressing matters of the day (e.g., Schumpeter, 1943). However, Pateman (1970) concludes that neither Mill nor Bentham harbored particularly high expectations concerning the ability of this expanded electorate to deliberate policy actively. These theorists were more concerned, Pateman (1970) insists, with the public’s ability to select and reject representatives than with its ability to hold informed political opinions as such (pp. 18-19).

Public Opinion as an Object of Study

Up to the mid-19th century, the bulk of writings dealing with public opinion were normative and philosophical in nature, being studies in political theory rather than studies of public opinion itself. (Necker’s writings are a notable exception.) Although representative democratic theory gained increasing support over the course of the 19th century, writings of this era were by no means of a single mind in evaluating the competence of public opinion. Supporters of liberal and democratic reforms saw it “as the voice of the enlightened middle class, as a safeguard against misrule, and as an agent of progress,” whereas more conservative critics understood it antithetically as potentially dangerous, shallow, and transitory; largely misinformed; and in need of practical limitations as a political force (Palmer, 1936, p. 247).

Toward the close of the 19th century, public opinion came under increasingly systematic analysis in the empirical manner characteristic of the developing social sciences (Lazarsfeld, 1957). Writers were intrigued by the “new force” of public opinion in society, which seemed to be gaining power and expanding to nearly all social classes with gains in education and with the emergence of more efficient means of mass communication (Bryce, 1888; Tarde, 1890/1903; Cooley, 1902; Lowell, 1913). As 1900 approached, there was a shift of both focus and method in the analysis of public opinion. In tandem with the growth of the social sciences within the academy, 20th-century works on public opinion more clearly reflected sociological and psychological rather than political and philosophical concerns. Whereas many earlier discussions of public opinion had dealt primarily with the philosophical problem of transmuting separate, individual wills into the will of the state, analysts now increasingly turned their attention to the problem of understanding the social and behavioral aspects of public opinion. Interest shifted to “the question of the function and powers of public opinion in society, the means by which it can be modified or controlled, and the relative importance of emotional and intellectual factors in its formulation” (Binkley, 1928, p. 393). This line of inquiry routed the study of public opinion into new academic fields: collective behavior and social psychology, attitude and opinion research, propaganda analysis, political behavior, and mass communication research. Enduring Problems of Public Opinion

By the dawn of the 20th century, many of the underlying concepts and conceptual distinctions that would surface in later theoretical writings and empirical research on public opinion had in one way or another already come to light (Lasswell, 1957). Although cast princi-
pally in terms of informed debate and majority rule (as a legacy of the Enlightenment and of representative democratic theory, respectively) the term public opinion carried with it other important senses as well. Enlightenment writers, in spite of their emphasis on human reason and the progress of society through education, did not fail to grasp the nonrational, emotional aspects of public opinion. For example, Speier (1950) recounts the efforts of some Enlightenment thinkers to establish public spectacles and national celebrations deliberately aimed at enlisting patriotic sentiment rather than thoughtful support. Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, the role of general opinion as enforcer of mores and social customs, in keeping with Locke’s “law of fashion,” did not escape critical notice (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Certainly, the general strikes and riots of the 19th century gave students of opinion pause for concern about the supposed rational nature of public opinion. The nonrational aspects of public behavior were carefully explored in the latter part of the 19th century by writers who devoted special attention to imitative behavior and emotional “contagion” in crowds (e.g., Tarde, 1890/1903; LeBon, 1895/1960; see also Mackay, 1841/1956; Chapter 3).

Although to some extent social scientific research and normative, philosophical analyses of public opinion have gone separate ways since the turn of the 20th century, there is still an important and lively connection between them. Empirical findings bearing on how public opinion develops and operates in society cannot help but be interpreted in light of how we think public opinion ought to be working (Berelson, 1950). Thoughtful considerations of the underlying normative questions concerning public opinion have continued throughout the 20th century: Lowell (1913), Lippmann (1922), Dewey (1927), Lasswell (1941), Mills (1956), Schattschneider (1960), and Ginsberg (1986) are just a few examples of such thinkers.

To close this chapter—and to set a frame around the social scientific concepts and research applications in the chapters to come—we should briefly consider some of the enduring fears and concerns that have motivated and sustained public opinion research. For the sake of simplicity, we can organize this discussion around five basic problems plaguing the modern public: two relate to its potential superficiality—lack of competence and lack of resources—and three concern its potential susceptibility—to the tyranny of the majority, to propaganda or mass persuasion, and to subtle domination by elite minorities.

Lack of competence. Reservations about the ability of the public at large to guide political affairs date back, as we have seen, at least as far as Plato and were prominent during the Enlightenment. But perhaps the strongest indictments of government by popular opinion are products of the 20th century—Lippmann’s Public Opinion (1922) and its sequel The Phantom Public (1925). Lippmann’s principal argument was that democratic theory asked far too much of ordinary citizens. They could not be expected to behave as legislators, to be active and involved in all the pertinent issues of the day.

Part of the problem, in Lippmann’s estimation, was the public’s general inattention and lack of concern about political affairs. As Bryce (1888) had noted, “public questions come in the third or fourth rank among the interests of life” (p. 8). People invest little time or energy learning the necessary, “unseen facts” of the political world. Compounding the problem was the manner in which opinions—based on the “pictures in our heads,” as Lippmann (1922, p. 3) said—are developed. Accurate knowledge of public affairs, on which sound opinions must be based, is simply unavailable to the ordinary citizen. The political world is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 29). Citizens form their ideas from sorely incomplete accounts, having little or no contact with actual events; they filter all they see and hear through their own prejudices and fears. Although in simpler societies rule by public opinion might succeed, the modern industrial world had become too large and too complicated. “The private citizen today,” Lippmann wryly observed, “has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake” (1925, p. 13).

The press, considered by progressive democrats to be a tool for educating and developing the public (e.g., Cooley, 1909), merely contributed to the ills of popular opinion in Lippmann’s view. “It is not workable,” he stated flatly, “and when you consider the nature of news, it is not even thinkable. . . . If the newspapers are to be charged with the duty of translating the whole public life of mankind, they fail, they are bound to fail, in any future one can conceive they will continue to fail” (1922, p. 362).

Lippmann was not the first to point out the discrepancy between the image of public participation in a democracy—inherit
the salons and coffeehouses of an earlier era—and the workings of mass opinion in a modern legislative nation (see Tocqueville, 1835/1945; Bryce, 1888), but his writings were notable for their vigor and insight and, especially, for the radical reworking of democratic governance they advocated. Abandoning hope of competent grass-roots opinion, Lippmann believed that modern public opinion would not improve unless an independent, expert organization, staffed by "political scientists," could make "the unseen facts intelligible" to decision makers and "organize public opinion" for the press (1922, p. 32). He envisioned a network of intelligence-gathering agencies (one for each federal cabinet office) with independent sources of funding, guaranteed tenure, and unrestricted "access to the facts," to accomplish those tasks (1922, p. 386).

Lack of resources. Later critics, although not disagreeing with Lippmann’s general portrait of modern public opinion, nonetheless took exception to his appraisal of the public’s fitness for democratic rule. Most prominently, Dewey (1927) argued that the problem was not incompetence on the part of the public but rather a lack of sufficient methods for public communication. "The physical and external means of collecting information," he observed, "have far outrun the intellectual phase of inquiry and organization of its results" (p. 180). Unlike Lippmann, who thought that the Great Society could never become the Great Community required for a true national democracy, Dewey (1927) believed that this was indeed conceivable, even though it would never possess all the qualities of a local community (p. 211). Part of the answer is education. It is not necessary that people have the knowledge and skill to carry out systematic investigations for every common concern, Dewey suggested, only that they have the ability to judge the knowledge supplied by experts on those concerns (p. 209). He agreed with Lippmann that the social sciences would play a central role in correcting the democratic state, but Dewey envisioned a very different kind of role. He proposed not a high-level, expert system of intelligence but, instead, a kind of community-based social science that would disseminate its interpretations to the public via artful presentations in the popular press. "The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is the problem of the public" (Dewey, 1927, p. 208). Along similar lines, a chapter title from Lasswell’s (1941) Democracy Through Public Opinion stated the matter succinctly: "Democracy Needs a New Way to Talk."

Others have also seen the primary issue as one of providing appropriate resources for the public. Schattschneider (1960), for example, argued that if there is indeed a problem with public opinion, it rests with the assumptions claimed for classical democratic theory (i.e., the need for omniscient citizens), not with the public itself. "People are able to survive in the modern world by learning what they need to know and what they do not need to know," he argued (p. 137). Citizens need not be involved in all the day-to-day details of government. When necessary, they become naturally involved by conflict, when their concerns and interests are at stake. What citizens need, Schattschneider suggests, is a competitive political system with strong leadership, controversy, and clear alternatives (p. 129). Other critics have made similar arguments, laying blame in one way or another, not at the feet of the public but at the door of the representative’s chamber or the editor’s office (e.g., Etzioni, 1989). The solution, it has been suggested, lies in offering better resources—principally through the mass media—for the public to use (Commission, 1947).

Tyranny of the majority. A third enduring problem of concern to analysts of public opinion is the danger that a kind of mediocrity in opinion will prevail—the lowest common denominator—created and maintained by the pressure of the majority. Seen another way, the danger is that in the face of large majorities, important minority viewpoints, even when valid, will not be strongly asserted. This fear had been expressed early in the 19th century by Tocqueville (1835/1945), who warned that in a society of equals, individuals in the minority would be left “alone and unprotected” against a dominant majority (p. 138). Throughout the 20th century, the problem of conformity to majority opinion has been a persistent theme, both in social criticism and in social science (White, 1961; Allen, 1975).

Nolle-Neumann (1984) reasserted these concerns in public opinion research, referring to the retreat of the minority in the face of majority pressure as a “spiral of silence.” Many analysts have warned that the power of the majority could become increasingly problematic over time. "The longer public opinion has ruled," Bryce (1888) suggested, "the more absolute is the authority of the majority likely to become, the less likely are
energetic minorities to arise, the more are politicians likely to occupy themselves, not in forming opinion, but in discovering and hastening to obey it” (p. 23). The answer to the problem, Bryce and other critics have proposed, is proper democratic socialization and education (see Lowell, 1913). A democracy must cultivate a vigorous individuality in its citizens to ensure that minority concerns are adequately pressed.2

Susceptibility to persuasion. A fourth concern centers on the susceptibility of the public to persuasion and, in particular, to highly emotional and nonrational appeals. This concern certainly seems warranted. The extent to which emotional appeals are part and parcel of politics has been quite commonly observed (Kornhauser, 1959; Edelman, 1964). Lippmann (1925), to take an early example, noted that “the making of one general will out of a multitude of separate wishes is not an Hegelian mystery, as so many political philosophers have imagined, but an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas” (p. 47).

The success of fascist regimes in Europe between the world wars, coupled with their extensive use of mass communications, fueled tremendous interest among American social scientists in the analysis of propaganda and persuasion. The panic caused by Orson Welles’s broadcast of H. G. Wells’s War of the Worlds in 1938 (Cantril, Gaudet, & Herzog, 1940) suggested that the capacities of the media for precipitating irrational mass behavior were considerable. Not surprisingly, throughout this century public opinion research and concerns about mass persuasion have gone hand in hand. From 1927, when Lasswell published his influential Propaganda Technique in the World War, until well into the 1950s, the study of public opinion and of propaganda were very closely connected. Many of the early readers in the field, for instance, bore the word propaganda in their titles (e.g., Smith, Lasswell, & Casey, 1946; Doob, 1948; Katz, Cartwright, Eldersveld, & Lee, 1954).

Domination by elites. Although some have feared an overabundance of power in the hands of the public, many others worry that too little is held. A fifth continuing cause for concern about public opinion in modern democracies focuses on what Ginsberg (1986) has called “the domestication of mass belief.” Here the problem is seen as one of increasing passivity on the part of public, leading in various ways to its domination by government and corporate elites. Mills (1956), for example, saw American society as consisting of three hierarchical strata: the first, a narrow stratum of power elite; the second, a stalemate collection of counterbalancing political forces; and the third, a large and increasingly powerless mass of citizens. Far from enjoying the idealized, free-flowing discussion of democratic debate, Mills argued, the American population had been transformed by the mass media into a market that consumes, rather than a public that produces, ideas and opinions (see also Habermas, 1962/1989; Gitlin, 1978).

Other forms of domination have been proposed by contemporary critics, who see different mechanisms of elite control (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Ginsberg (1986) has argued that with the advent of electoral democracy, the traditionally adversarial relationship between the people and their government has been supplanted by one of dependence. Now people willingly support the state, having grown increasingly dependent on its services. As he tells it, “with the development of electoral institutions, the expression of mass opinion became less disruptive; when citizens began to see government as a source of benefits, opinion became fundamentally less hostile to central authority . . . in short, western regimes converted mass opinion from a hostile, unpredictable, and often disruptive force into a less dangerous and more tractable phenomenon” (p. 58). Ginsberg sees the opinion polling industry itself, despite its stated intentions of increasing the democratic voice of the people (Gallup & Rae, 1940), as a central part of this domestication process. Along similar lines, Habermas (1962/1989) argues that mechanisms of political consensus formation in modern democratic nations, such as regular polls and popular election campaigns—although indeed ensuring periodic pressure on governments to satisfy basic needs of the population—do not foster, and may even suppress, the rational argumentation or wide ranging popular discussion characteristic of a true public sphere (pp. 211-222; but see Crespi, 1989, pp. 93-130).

There are other important concerns too, but these five have attracted the most continuing attention. At a general level, the key question is whether public opinion processes in their natural operation are in fact democratic in the sense implied by earlier Enlightenment notions; in other words, whether “true” public opinion, or that which influences policy choices (Key, 1961), is in reality shaped by
an egalitarian, bottom-up communication of public concerns and ideas to policymakers. As we turn to our discussion of social scientific treatments of public opinion, we will see not only how public opinion researchers have approached their work conceptually but also how they have in various ways shed new light on these enduring questions.

Notes


2. The cultivation of individuality may introduce its own difficulties. One discussed by Lowell (1913) occurs when, after reasonable debate, the judgment of the majority is rejected entirely by an irreconcilable minority. A democracy requires, in Lowell's estimation, a balance between tolerance for minority viewpoints and acceptance of the will of the majority (see his discussion of the doctrine of the harmony of interests, pp. 28-29).

3. Conceptualizing the Public

Perhaps the most common conception of public opinion today equates it with a more or less straightforward aggregation of individual opinions, or "what opinion polls try to measure" (P. Converse, 1967, p. 513; Childs, 1939; Minar, 1960). When we compare this notion with those prevalent early in the 20th century, the contrast is striking. Earlier analysts were far more likely to frame public opinion as an inherently collective, supraindividual phenomenon or, as Cooley (1909) put it, "a cooperative product of communication and reciprocal influence" (p. 121). Although the rise of opinion polling would later tend to individualize the concept—bringing it closely in line with the majoritarian view discussed earlier—public opinion was commonly viewed in the early 1900s as a special kind of social-level product—not a collection of separate public opinions but instead the opinion of a public.

This tendency to conceive of public opinion in supraindividual terms was part and parcel of the age. Students of human social and psychological life at the turn of the 20th century, both in Europe and America (e.g., Tarde, 1890/1903; James, 1890; Baldwin, 1893; LeBon 1895/1960; Cooley, 1902, 1909) were clearly intrigued by prominent manifestations of collective behavior that typified the era: spontaneous crowds, strikes, mass demonstrations, and riots. Analysts were also fascinated by the role that the modern communication media—principally the press—appeared to play in shaping and guiding the "psychology of the masses." It was against a backdrop of general intellectual interest in phenomena such as mass and crowd behavior that the earliest attempts to provide a social-scientific treatment of public opinion appeared.

The aim of this chapter is to review these early and influential treatments of the public—conceptions that identified public opinion quite closely with collective behavior and focused mainly on explicating the sociological nature of the public as a transitory, loosely structured group (e.g., Park, 1904/1972; Blumer, 1946; Davison, 1958; Foote & Hart, 1953). Central to these treatments is the notion that public opinion can be viewed as part of a larger sociological process, as a mechanism through which stable societies adapt to changing circumstances via discussion and debate. Particular attention is also given to the concept of a public issue, especially to the way in which the public, as a developing social entity, theoretically forms itself over time through spontaneous argument, discussion, and collective opposition over an issue. For these reasons, subsequent writers have sometimes referred to this conceptualization of the public as a discursive model (Young, 1948; Bogardus, 1951; Price & Roberts, 1987; Price, 1988). Although the conceptual framework is now nearly a century old, it continues to inform, often indirectly, current thinking about public opinion across a variety of disciplines (in political science, for example, see Nimmo, 1978, pp. 188-240; Cobb & Elder, 1983, chs. 5, 6).

With its strong emphasis on public opinion as emergent from debate, this sociological formulation is in many respects a direct descendant of 18th-century Enlightenment ideas previously discussed. But the analytical framework propounded by Park (1904/