

## **INVOKING PUBLIC OPINION**

### **POLICY ELITES AND SOCIAL SECURITY**

---

FAY LOMAX COOK

JASON BARABAS

BENJAMIN I. PAGE

**Abstract** Do policy elites invoke public opinion? When they do, are their claims based on evidence from public opinion surveys? To learn about the claims that policy elites make, we examined statements the president and members of Congress, experts, and interest group leaders in congressional hearings made about Social Security. To learn about opinion data on Social Security, we conducted a Lexis-Nexis search of the archives of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Our analyses show that policy elites discussing Social Security did invoke public opinion. Contrary to our expectations, however, few of the elite invocations of public opinion cited specific surveys or concrete facts about the distribution of opinion. Although claims directly contradicting survey evidence were relatively rare, only with the rather few specific claims by congressional elites did we find much clear-cut support in the available polling data. Relatively seldom could we find clear-cut support for the elites' general claims. Moreover, some of the most frequent claims about public opinion—including the UFO story and alleged public support for privatization—could have been contested but seldom were. The highly visible and well-polled case of Social Security suggests that specific, data-based elite invocations of public opinion may be even less common on other, lower-visibility and less-polled issues. It also suggests that survey research professionals might do well to intensify their scrutiny of public discourse about public opinion and to increase their efforts to bring scientific expertise to bear upon such discourse.

In her 1997 American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) presidential address, Diane Colasanto argued, “The use of public opinion research

FAY LOMAX COOK is professor of human development and social policy and director of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, JASON BARABAS is assistant professor of political science at Southern Illinois University, and BENJAMIN I. PAGE is Fulcher Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University. The authors thank the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University for supporting the research on which this article is based. In addition, they give special thanks to Ina Ganguli for her research assistance.

in debates about policy and legislation has been exploding for decades, and it is not well examined” (Colasanto 1997, p. 524). She called for a new effort “to monitor systematically the use of public opinion research in public debate” (p. 527) by probing legislative and polling archives. Another recent AAPOR president, Michael Traugott, used his AAPOR presidential address to suggest that something similar could be done in conjunction with the media (Traugott 2000). Both of these proposals echo arguments Walter Lippmann (1922) made many years earlier for monitoring the accuracy of claims made in the media. Our research responds to these ideas about the important role that polls may play and the need for close scrutiny of how they are used by examining how policy elites invoke public opinion in their deliberations.

Our examination is grounded in democratic theory. Democracy, by most accounts, is supposed to involve policy makers paying attention to ordinary citizens—that is, to the public. One way that policy elites might be expected to demonstrate their attention to the public is by explicitly acknowledging, mentioning, and discussing public opinion. In doing so, they might make use of the vast array of systematic polls and surveys of public opinion that are now available. By the same token, one might expect that any claims they make about the public’s policy preferences would tend to be accurate, backed by the available evidence.

In this article, we explore the extent to which these expectations are actually met, using the case of Social Security. Social Security is a particularly interesting case for this purpose, both because it is a very big and important program in itself (it takes up the largest single fraction of the federal budget, with outlays estimated at \$455 billion, or about 23 percent of the budget, in 2002, and pays benefits to some 46 million people each year [U.S. Office of Management and Budget 2001a, 2001b]), and because disputes over the allegedly imminent “bankruptcy” of the program and over such proposed changes as privatization have made it a highly visible, hotly contested issue about which abundant public opinion survey data exist. That is, Social Security seems to be an especially easy case for our expectations. If ever U.S. politicians pay attention to public opinion, surely we would expect them to do so on such an important, high-salience, contentious issue as the future of Social Security. To the extent that our expectations are met, therefore, this case may tell us little about other, lower-visibility issues. But to the extent that our expectations are not met—to the extent that elite invocations of public opinion are infrequent, or nonspecific, or inaccurate—there will be strong a fortiori reasons to infer that the same thing is likely to be equally or more true for lower-visibility issues.

## Literature and Hypotheses

A considerable body of theory suggests that elected public officials in a democracy have reason to pay attention to public opinion. Rational choice theorists, for example, have long argued that vote-seeking politicians are compelled to advocate and enact policies favored by a majority of voters (e.g., Davis and Hinich 1966; Downs 1957, chap. 4). Indeed, if citizens' preferences are "jointly single peaked" (i.e., unidimensional), the median voter theorem indicates that politicians' rhetoric and policies should exactly reflect the preferences of the average voter (Black 1958).<sup>1</sup>

Empirically, too, there is substantial scholarly evidence of rather close connections between citizens' preferences (as measured by surveys) and public policies. Various studies have found a substantial correspondence between national policies and majority opinion at one moment in time (Monroe 1979), between policies in the several states and the liberalism or conservatism of public opinion in those states (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993), and between changes over time in public opinion and public policy (Hartley and Russett 1992; Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, MacKuen, and Eriksen 1995; Wlezien 1995; see also Bartels 1991). (There are, however, some indications that the closeness of this correspondence may have declined in recent years (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Monroe 1998).

Moreover, there has been an enormous increase in policy-related polls and surveys of public opinion in the United States. At the national level, polls have increasingly been put to use by politicians. Jacobs and Shapiro (1994, 1995), for example, have shown how Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon connected presidential activity with public opinion by developing a "public opinion apparatus" in the White House to assemble public opinion data and conduct public relations activities. Subsequent presidents have done the same. John Geer (1996, p. 191) notes that the proliferation of polls now allows politicians to ascertain the public's will and (on highly salient issues, at least) to act in accordance with it. Most public opinion scholars (but cf. skeptics like Ginsberg [1986] and Herbst [1993]) would probably argue that the rise of polls has given U.S. politicians much more accurate information than they have ever before had concerning what sorts of policies their constituents favor or oppose (see Page and Shapiro 1992).

Given this abundance of information about public opinion, most of us would probably also expect that politicians would take note of the existence of survey evidence—if only to justify their own positions or to convince others—and

1. To be sure, the social choice literature has devoted much attention to the theoretical possibility that, absent unidimensionality, no definitive majority preference or collective preference may exist (Arrow [1951] 1963; McKelvey 1976). Empirically, however, even when preferences are multidimensional, there may exist a relatively small "top cycle" set of policy alternatives that approximate a single majority policy choice. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that, in the United States, policy preferences are in fact rather strongly unidimensional (organized along a liberal-conservative continuum), at least at the elite level (Poole and Rosenthal 1997).

refer to such evidence with a fair degree of accuracy. This seems most obvious in the case of public officials who see themselves as “delegates” of ordinary citizens, dedicated to enacting policies that the public wants, and elites who take a national point of view for which national survey data would seem most relevant: presidents, for example, who have a national constituency; experts and interest group representatives who focus on the broad national picture; and members of Congress who look beyond the narrow confines of their own states or districts to consider the nation as a whole. But it could well also be true even of members of Congress who care only about opinion in their own districts, since national survey data often rather accurately reflect majority opinion in all but the most unusual and atypical geographical subunits of the country.<sup>2</sup> Invoking public opinion is particularly likely to occur on an issue like Social Security, which touches the lives of virtually all demographic and geographical groups of Americans.

Thus, our hypotheses, at least with regard to such an important, high-salience, contentious, and much-polled issue as Social Security, are the following:

1. Policy elites refer to public opinion.
2. They often do so specifically, in a manner that alludes to the distribution or balance of opinion on particular issues.
3. Policy elites’ references to public opinion are generally backed by, or at least not grossly or systematically inconsistent with, available survey evidence.

## Research Methods

We selected a period of particularly active debate about Social Security, the years 1993–99, and focused on presidential statements and witnesses’ testimony in congressional hearings. For presidential statements, we used the Presidential Papers CD-ROM (for the comparison period 1969–92) and the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents data base (for the study period 1993–99), which is archived by the National Archives and Records Administration of the Government Printing Office and is available via the Internet at <http://www.gpo.gov/nara/nara003.html>. This data base includes all statements, speeches, remarks, and press conferences released by the White House. We downloaded and printed every document that mentioned “Social Security.” The period from January 1993 to December 1999 yielded 705 such documents. We read each document and listed all statements invoking public opinion.

For congressional hearings we used the Lexis-Nexis Congressional Universe

2. On foreign policy issues, for example, Kull and Destler (1999, chap. 9) found that when they surveyed opinion in some of the allegedly most “isolationist” congressional districts in the country, citizens in those districts expressed policy preferences just about as internationalist as in the country as a whole.

to locate all hearings on Social Security. Between 1993 and 1999 there were 108 such hearings. We then either found published transcripts of the hearings in the government documents room at the university library or downloaded and printed the hearings from the Internet. On closer inspection, many of these hearings dealt with technical issues related to the administration of Social Security. In order to narrow our data set to a manageable size and to the same kinds of issues the president was addressing, we restricted our sample of hearings to those that dealt with long-term issues of Social Security reform. To locate these, we used a filtering mechanism—the mention of total or partial privatization, a reform that began to be advocated in the 1980s by some Social Security critics (Kingson and Williamson 1999). Of the 108 hearings, 40 dealt with long-term issues of Social Security reform, all of them at least mentioning privatization. (Only three of the 40 hearings were devoted solely to privatization—one each in 1995, 1996, and 1998.) We read the 40 hearings and listed all statements invoking public opinion. As with the presidential documents, a single testimony could contain more than one reference to public opinion, and in the congressional testimonies they often did.

Our unit of analysis is a single elite “invocation” of or reference to public opinion. We defined an invocation of public opinion broadly: either policy elites could refer specifically to the distribution of public opinion by citing percentages (“65 percent of Americans think . . .”) or by using quantitative words like “three-quarters,” “a third,” “most,” “few,” “a majority,” or “a minority”; or they could make what we called “general” references that were less quantitatively precise, using terms like “Americans support . . .” or “the public favors . . .” or “young people believe. . . .”

We coded each claim on three dimensions. First, we coded the reference as “specific” or “general,” as noted above. Second, we categorized the aspect of Social Security to which each claim referred. After reading and taking notes on half of the presidential statements and half of the congressional hearings, we learned that claims about public opinion fell into five topical categories: the popularity of Social Security, confidence in or concerns about the future of the program, changes in or reforms of Social Security, specific presidential positions or initiatives, and other.<sup>3</sup> Third, we categorized the type of person who made the claim: the president, a member of Congress, an interest group leader, or an expert (defined as a researcher from a think tank, an academic from a university or college, a consultant, or a subject area specialist).

Because coding often entails judgment calls about which category is most appropriate, it is important to determine the reliability of the coding. We performed a reliability check in two stages. After a training session, two coders

3. A range of claims about public opinion fall into the “other” category, such as claims about how much knowledge Americans have about Social Security and what Americans think about technical issues related to the operations of the program.

coded roughly half of all claims made by policy elites. Overall agreement was 89 percent. After discussing the items for which there were discrepant decisions and reaching consensus about the appropriate codes to use, one of the two coders coded the rest. A third person coded a random sample of a quarter of all claims from the second coding. Overall agreement was 94 percent. These relatively high levels of reliability increase our confidence in the accuracy of the coding reported here.

Our next task was to determine the extent to which evidence from systematic public opinion surveys supported the claims made by policy elites. In order to locate public opinion data, we conducted a Lexis-Nexis search of the archives of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Using “Social Security” as a keyword, we found that 2,352 relevant questions had been asked in national polls between 1990 and 1999. Two of the authors read through the questions and responses (i.e., marginals). They then individually went through each of the elite invocations and coded the available evidence as showing clear-cut support for the claim, mixed support (either majorities were slim, methodological issues such as question order or question wording obscured the interpretation, or multiple poll findings disagreed with one another), or little or no support (either the data contradicted the claim, no relevant data existed, or we failed to locate relevant data—e.g., because they were not publicly available).<sup>4</sup> Any time the ratings diverged (approximately a quarter of the time), the second author used keyword searches of the Roper archives to locate relevant questions, and in all cases the two authors resolved their discrepant ratings. In the section that follows, we first examine policy elites’ claims about public opinion regarding Social Security and then evaluate the evidence concerning the accuracy of those claims.

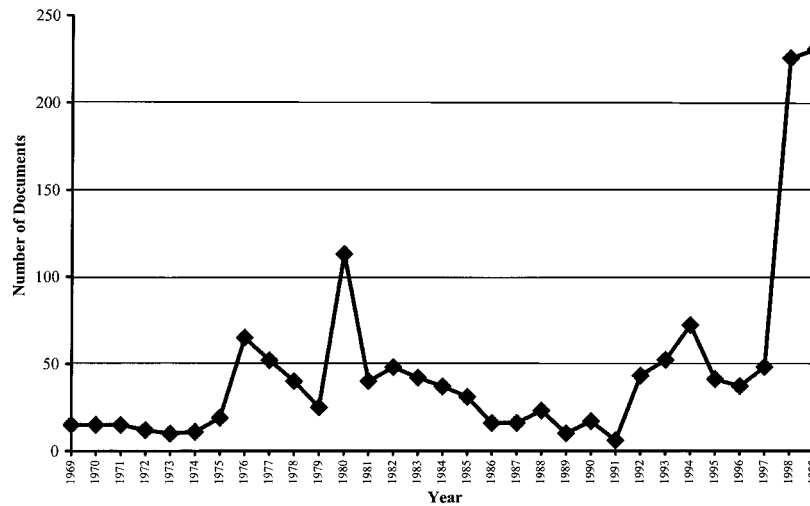
## Findings

### PRESIDENT CLINTON INVOKES PUBLIC OPINION

From the time President Bill Clinton took office in early 1993 until December 1999, he discussed Social Security in 705 public speeches, weekly radio addresses, press conferences, and so on. As figure 1 shows, the number of such addresses increased sharply during his second term.<sup>5</sup> In 1998, he discussed Social Security more than four and a half times as often as he did in 1997—a total of 225 times as compared with 48. This high level of attention continued

4. Though we examined the entire data base for possible questions, we deemed only polls published prior to or concurrent with an elite’s assertion about public opinion relevant for the purpose of using polling data to validate that assertion.

5. For simplicity of terminology, we use the term “addresses” to refer inclusively to all public speeches, weekly radio addresses, press conferences, etc. transcribed and archived in the Public Papers of the President CD-ROM and in the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents.



**Figure 1.** Presidential addresses in which Social Security is mentioned, 1969–99. Addresses are defined as speeches, weekly radio addresses, press conferences, and so forth. We coded only addresses in which a president mentioned Social Security at least once during his remarks. Source: The data were developed by the authors using the Presidential Papers CD-ROM for the period 1969–92 and the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents data base for the period 1993–99.

in 1999, when he had something to say about Social Security in 230 separate public addresses.

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in the frequency of Social Security–related addresses for all presidents who served between 1969 and 1999. Clearly, Clinton paid far more attention to Social Security than did his predecessors. Previous presidents neared Clinton’s level in only two isolated years: 1976, when President Ford mentioned Social Security in 65 public addresses, and 1980, when President Carter raised the issue of Social Security in 115 addresses.

Particularly after Clinton’s 1998 state of the union address, in which he spoke of a “sizable surplus” in the budget and declared that we should use it to “save Social Security first,” he began to emphasize this issue and to invoke public opinion about it fairly frequently. While discussing Social Security he had made only two references to public opinion in 1995, one in 1996, and none at all in 1993, 1994, or 1997. But then he invoked public opinion 31 times in addresses that discussed Social Security in 1998 and 16 times in 1999. These references fell into the five categories we list in table 1.

Overall, we identified 50 separate instances in 44 addresses in which Pres-

**Table 1.** Claims Made about Public Opinion by Policy Elites (%)

| Claim Content   | Claims Made by                                     | Claims Made in Congress             |                                       |                                     |  |                          |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|
|   | President Clinton<br>( <i>N</i> = 50) <sup>a</sup> | Total Congress<br>( <i>N</i> = 264) | Congress Members<br>( <i>N</i> = 105) | Interest Groups<br>( <i>N</i> = 96) | Experts <sup>b</sup><br>( <i>N</i> = 60) | Other<br>( <i>N</i> = 3) |
| Confidence or concerns about the future of Social Security            | 44   | 38                                  | 39                                    | 32                                  | 41                                       | 0                        |
| Support for specific presidential positions or particular initiatives | 20   | 7                                   | 10                                    | 2                                   | 6  | 33                       |
| Support for changes, reforms, or the privatization of Social Security | 16   | 19                                  | 13                                    | 18                                  | 27                                       | 0                        |
| Social Security is a popular program                                  | 10   | 13                                  | 12                                    | 15                                  | 13                                       | 33                       |
| Other statements  | 10   | 23                                  | 25                                    | 33                                  | 14                                       | 33                       |
| Total   | 100  | 100                                 | 100                                   | 100                                 | 100                                      | 100                      |

<sup>a</sup> The *N* refers to number of claims about public opinion. For the president, these claims were made in 44 addresses in which public opinion on Social Security was mentioned.

<sup>b</sup> We define experts as researchers from think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, academics from universities and colleges, consultants, and subject area specialists.



ident Clinton invoked public opinion. As table 1 indicates, Clinton's most frequent invocations (22 of them, or 44 percent) involved confidence in or concern about the future of Social Security. Approximately two-thirds of those remarks referred to the public's concern that the costs of paying for the retirement of the "baby boom" generation would place an intolerable burden on younger workers (e.g., Clinton 1999b).

In seven of his 22 statements related to confidence in Social Security, President Clinton alluded to a 1994 poll for the Third Millennium organization that allegedly showed that more young people believed in unidentified flying objects (UFOs) than in the long-term survival of Social Security. In a speech at the University of Illinois, for example, Clinton declared, "There are polls that say that young people in their twenties think it's more likely that they will see UFOs than that they will ever collect Social Security" (Clinton 1998b).

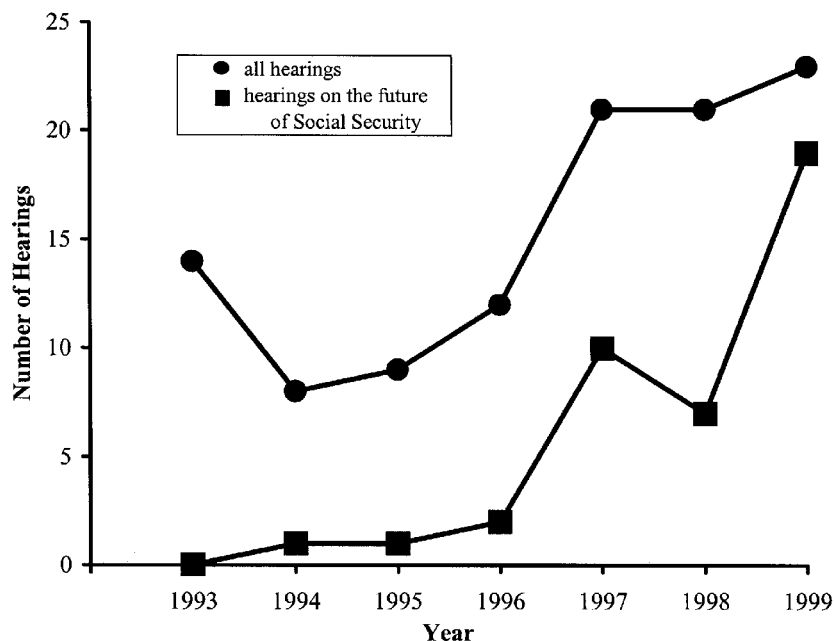
As table 1 shows, the second most common way that President Clinton invoked public opinion was to claim public support for his own specific proposals or initiatives (he did so in 20 percent of the references). For example, the president stated, "I am heartened by the strong support this approach [saving the budget surplus until Social Security is saved] has gained from the American people, including the young people to whom I spoke yesterday at Georgetown University" (Clinton 1998c).

Sixteen percent of Clinton's invocations of public opinion concerned public support for changes or reforms in Social Security in general, on grounds that the present system would become unsustainable as baby boomers began to retire (e.g., Clinton 1998a). In only 10 percent of his addresses did President Clinton invoke public opinion to point out that Social Security is widely popular. His chief technique for emphasizing Social Security's importance and popularity was to cite former president Franklin D. Roosevelt's path-breaking establishment of the program and to present himself as carrying on Roosevelt's legacy and "saving" Social Security (e.g., Clinton 1999a).

Most of Clinton's claims about public opinion (35 out of 50, or 70 percent) were general as opposed to specific. When invoking public opinion he often used terms like "the American people support," "young people," "everybody I know," "people in the baby boom generation I've talked to," or "the people I know in my generation." Rather seldom did he make specific statements about the distribution of public opinion or cite particular polls.

#### CONGRESSIONAL WITNESSES INVOKE PUBLIC OPINION

From January 1993 through December 1999, Congress held 108 hearings on Social Security. Figure 2 shows that the number of hearings increased sharply beginning in 1997, rising from 12 in 1996 to 21 in 1997. This increase appears to coincide with the 1997 release of the report of the Advisory Council on Social Security and the statements President Clinton made about Social Security in and after his 1998 and 1999 state of the union addresses.



**Figure 2.** Congressional hearings on Social Security, 1993–99. The overall number of hearings includes hearings in which the focus was either on Social Security directly or on issues related to Social Security. The hearings on the future of Social Security are those in which privatization of Social Security is discussed. (Of these, three were solely devoted to privatization: one in 1995, one in 1996, and one in 1998.)

We examine the 40 hearings that dealt with long-term issues of Social Security reform and focus on all statements by members of Congress or those invited to testify (experts and representatives of interest groups) who invoked public opinion. As with the presidential statements, we classified each public opinion reference into one of five topical categories (confidence, support for presidential initiatives, support for changes, popularity, and other). In fact, however, very few (only 7 percent) of the statements invoking public opinion in the congressional hearings covered President Clinton's positions or initiatives. This presumably resulted from the fact that the vast majority of hearings on the future of Social Security occurred in 1996 or later, after the 1994 elections had put anti-Clinton Republicans in control of Congress and in charge of selecting the witnesses for hearings.

*Declining confidence/rising concerns.* As table 1 indicates, the largest proportion of those in congressional hearings who invoked public opinion did

so to make the point that confidence had declined. Members of Congress, interest group representatives, and experts all said that Americans had grave doubts about the Social Security system's long-term financial viability.

A number of the claims about public opinion cited the Luntz/Siegel Third Millennium poll that allegedly showed that young people were more likely to believe in unidentified flying objects than to think that Social Security would be there for them when they retire (e.g., Gramlich 1997; Grassley 1997; Lukefahr 1994). As time passed, the UFO story was retold with even more dramatic flair. For example, Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) energetically declared, "We all know we have a demographic tsunami coming, 75 million baby boomers. At home, I can tell you, more of the young people think they are going to have a date with an extraterrestrial than to get a Social Security check. I mean, that is essentially the landscape I find at home" (Wyden 1998). Whereas in 1994-97 most of these claims had referred to the views of "young people" (the population from which the Third Millennium poll sampled was people aged 18-35), later some members of Congress (e.g., Breaux 1998) generalized the UFO finding to baby boomers.

No speakers who testified disputed the claim that the public overwhelmingly lacked confidence in the future of Social Security, even though the evidence for it in the polling record is ambiguous. Why so many claims about falling public confidence? Many of the congressional witnesses and President Clinton presumably wanted to strengthen calls for action on Social Security by emphasizing that they were responding to the worries of ordinary Americans.

*Support for changes/reforms/privatization.* Nineteen percent of all congressional citations of public opinion concerning Social Security involved claims of public support for some type of change in the program. A particularly frequent claim was that the public supports full or partial privatization. Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, for example, reported extensively on a survey that Public Opinion Strategies had conducted for Cato, and he declared, "More than two-thirds of all voters, 69 percent, would support transforming the program into a privatized mandatory savings program. More than three-quarters of younger voters support privatization" (Tanner 1996). Several members of Congress (e.g., Hagel 1998) also spoke out for privatization and claimed public support. Other members asked whether the public was really "ready" for privatization. One think tank expert answered with no caveats, "Absolutely! There's not the slightest doubt in my mind that they are" (Glassman 1998).

Curiously, although some testified against privatization, none cited public opinion data to argue against it. It is not clear why not, since, as we will see below, public opinion data were available that could have helped privatization opponents make their case.

*Popularity of Social Security.* Only 13 percent of all congressional claims about public opinion mentioned Social Security's great popularity among the public. Notable among the few clearly invoking or acknowledging the pro-

gram's popularity were Ball (1997), Kerrey (1997), Schultz (1995), and Tanner (1996). But only 13 percent, barely over one-eighth, of congressional invocations of public opinion made this point.

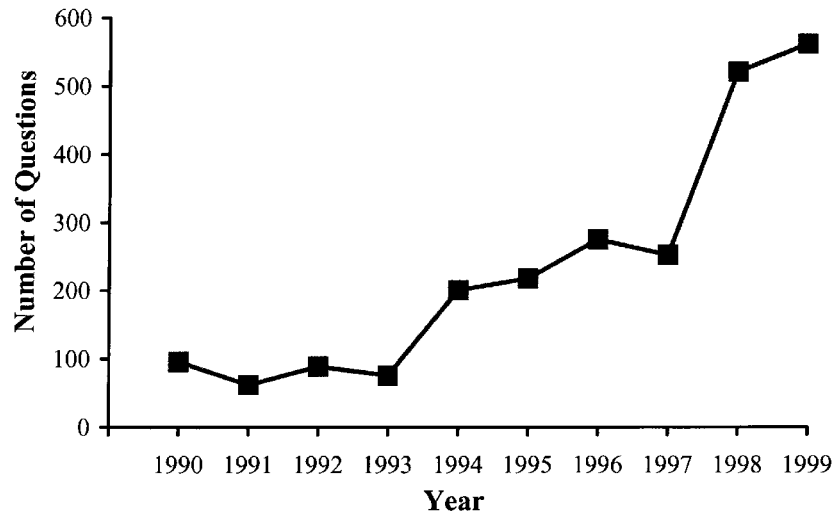
Why so few mentions of Social Security's popularity with the public? Presumably many witnesses and members of Congress simply took the importance and popularity of the program as a given, known to everyone. In addition, some advocates of privatization may have preferred to de-emphasize the great popularity of the existing program. It is unclear, however, why defenders of Social Security so rarely invoked the overwhelming public support for the program that many polls and surveys reveal.

*Generality versus specificity of claims.* Just as the great majority of presidential statements about public opinion toward Social Security were general rather than specific, a very large majority (73 percent) of congressional claims were also general. Only 27 percent were specific. A few provided concrete evidence using actual survey results (e.g., "a survey released by the Employee Benefit Research Institute [EBRI] reports that . . ."), but most made very general claims (e.g., "there is an alarming erosion of public confidence in the Social Security system").

Why might this be? One possibility is that specific data about public opinion are simply hard to find or remember, so policy elites use cognitive shortcuts and shorthand phrases rather than concrete percentages. But in fact, survey data were abundant. Moreover, presidents and congressional witnesses generally write out their words in advance and have access to research assistance; surely they could have handled a few marginal frequencies. Another possibility is that policy elites consider their audiences to be uninterested in or incapable of understanding concrete data. That explanation might be applicable to presidents' speeches to broad public audiences, but it hardly seems to apply to congressional witnesses' testimony to highly elite audiences. A third possibility is that many policy elites simply do not believe the results of surveys, and they prefer other ways of judging public sentiment (see Herbst 1998). For example, they may rely more on letters and other contacts from constituents. But we are inclined also to give some weight to a fourth possibility: that policy elites who cannot find solid evidence of public agreement with their own positions sometimes choose to make vague (even factually insupportable) assertions that "the people" stand with them.

#### THE ACCURACY OF CLAIMS ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION

How accurate are policy elites' claims about public opinion? In order to address this question, we used the Roper Center archives to find relevant questions that were asked of respondents in national surveys from 1990 through 1999. During this period, polling organizations asked at least 2,352



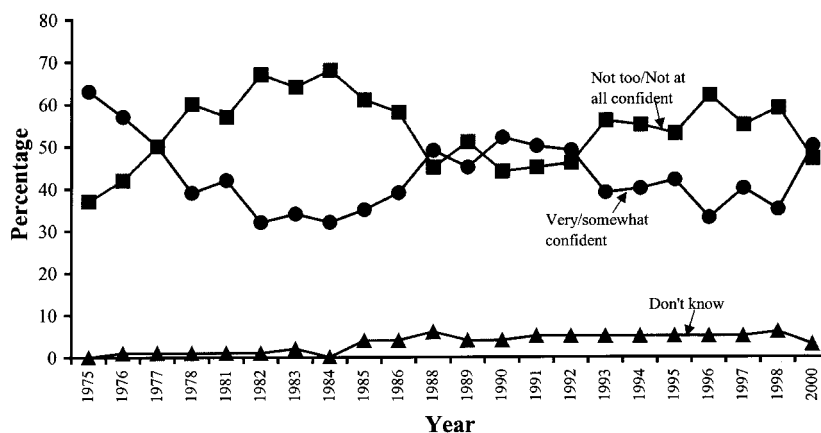
**Figure 3.** Social Security survey questions, 1990–99. Source: Compiled by the authors using the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archives.

questions about Social Security, a very imposing number.<sup>6</sup> Figure 3 shows that the number of questions increased dramatically over the 1990s, as Washington decision makers focused more and more on Social Security. Fewer than 100 questions were asked each year between 1990 and 1993. These numbers more than doubled in the years 1994–97, ranging from 201 to 275 questions each year. In 1998 the number of poll questions once again more than doubled, to 521, and this number increased slightly in 1999.

*Public confidence in Social Security.* We have noted many presidential and congressional claims that public confidence in the future of Social Security had “declined” or “eroded” and had reached a very low level. Moreover, again and again, President Clinton and congressional witnesses asserted that young people are more likely to believe in UFOs than in the future of Social Security.

In opinion polls over the years, the public has answered many questions about its confidence in Social Security that can help us evaluate these claims. The assertions of low confidence were generally correct, though erosion of confidence was not a recent phenomenon. The UFO assertion was misleading, the product of a strangely uncontradicted misinterpretation of survey data.

6. The number of questions asked about Social Security is imposing in comparison with the number asked by pollsters about other social programs over the same time period: 1,937 questions about Medicare, 462 about Medicaid, 95 about food stamps, and 15 about unemployment insurance. The number of relevant questions may increase in the future, because Roper continues to add past questions to its archives as they are submitted by polling organizations.



**Figure 4.** Confidence in Social Security. Sources: A “Monitoring Attitudes of the Public” survey sponsored by the American Council of Life Insurance and conducted by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White (1975–82) and the Roper Organization/Roper Starch Worldwide (1983–2000). More than one thousand respondents participated in each survey. The questions was, “How confident are you, yourself, in the future of the Social Security system? Would you say you are very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not at all confident?” Note that the question was not asked in 1999.

Beginning in 1975, Yankelovich/Skelly/White and Roper repeatedly asked samples of Americans, “How confident are you, yourself, in the future of the Social Security system? Would you say you are very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not at all confident?” The trend in responses is given in figure 4. There was indeed a substantial decline in confidence between 1975 and the 1990s: in 1975 almost two-thirds of the public said they were “very” or “somewhat” confident, whereas in the 1990s it was the other way around—almost two-thirds were “not too” or “not at all” confident. But there was nothing very sharp or recent about this decline. The biggest, most sustained drop in confidence occurred between 1975 and 1982. This timing is no trivial matter. As Jacobs and Shapiro (1998a; see also 1998b) suggest, “the fact that trust began to fall in the ’70s suggests the real cause is the public’s general loss of faith in government after Watergate and Vietnam, not any focused critique of Social Security.”

Still, the low level of expressed confidence was genuine. It is even more apparent in responses—not shown here—to a different question fielded by a different organization (Matthew Greenwald and Associates) in 1996 and subsequently: “How confident are you that the Social Security system will con-

tinue to provide *benefits of equal value* to the benefits received by retirees today?" (our italics). Not surprisingly, the number of respondents who said they expected benefits to continue to be of equal value was less (about 15 percentage points less) than the number who expressed general confidence in Social Security in response to the other question. Some claims of a sharp recent decline in public confidence may have been based on a careless conflation of answers to these two different questions. If "confident in the future" data for 1994 were compared with "benefits of equal value" data for 1996, there would seem to be a drop from 41 percent confidence in 1994 to 26 percent in 1996, largely or wholly an artifact of the difference in question wording.<sup>7</sup>

Marmor (1997) and Skidmore (1999) argue that the public's lack of confidence in Social Security did not well up spontaneously from the citizenry but, rather, reflected alarmist rhetoric about "crisis" and "bankruptcy" from elites themselves: rhetoric that may have been significantly misleading. A bit of survey evidence supporting this possibility is the finding by Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), in four 1998 and 1999 surveys, that many respondents had an extremely bleak view—supported by some media-reported rhetoric but not shared by program actuaries or other experts—of what would happen if "no changes are made" in the program for 20 years. Large majorities (69, 66, 66, and 68 percent) said that Social Security would "pay less than half of the benefits" or even "run out of money" altogether.<sup>8</sup> The Social Security and Medicare Boards of Trustees (1999) and other experts (Baker and Weisbrot 1999), on the other hand, agreed that even after the alleged "bankruptcy" point when the trust fund might be depleted and the promised benefits might exceed revenues, some three-quarters of benefits would continue to be paid.

The most dramatic claim that policy elites made about the public's lack of confidence in Social Security was that young people were more likely to believe in UFOs than to believe that they would receive Social Security. Do poll data really exist to substantiate this claim? The answer is decidedly mixed. In 1994, the Luntz Research Company and Mark A. Siegel and Associates conducted a survey of 500 18–34-year-olds, asking, "Do you think Social Security will still exist by the time you retire?" Remarkably, 63 percent said no. Eight questions later, interviewers asked, "And one final question, and I ask you to take this seriously—Do think UFOs exist?" Forty-six percent said yes. Thus it is true that, according to this survey, a larger proportion of young adults aged 18–34 said that UFOs exist than said Social Security would exist when they retire. But interpreters of the survey ignored the possibility (alluded to in the UFO question itself) that respondents gave flip, nonserious responses

7. We have observed a number of cases in which policy elites referred to opinion "trends" based on survey questions that were not worded identically.

8. PSRA surveys, 3/98, 7/98, 2/99, and 5/99.

**Table 2.** UFOs and Social Security Confidence

|  | % in Survey     |                 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
|  | All Respondents | 18–34-Year-Olds |
| 1994 Luntz/Siegel and Third Millennium: <sup>a</sup> |                 |                 |
| Social Security will exist in retirement?            |                 |                 |
| Yes  | ...             | 28              |
| No   | ...             | 63              |
| Don't know/refuse                                    | ...             | 9               |
| Do UFOs exist?                                       |                 |                 |
| Yes  | ...             | 46              |
| No   | ...             | 43              |
| Don't know/refuse                                    | ...             | 11              |
| 1997 Greenwald and EBRI: <sup>b</sup>                |                 |                 |
| Greater confidence?                                  |                 |                 |
| Receive Social Security                              | 71              | 63              |
| Alien life exists                                    | 26              | 33              |
| Don't know/refuse                                    | 3               | 4               |

<sup>a</sup> Third Millennium Survey, Luntz Research Companies and Mark A. Siegel and Associates, 9/8–9/10/94. See Sec. *Ia* of the appendix.

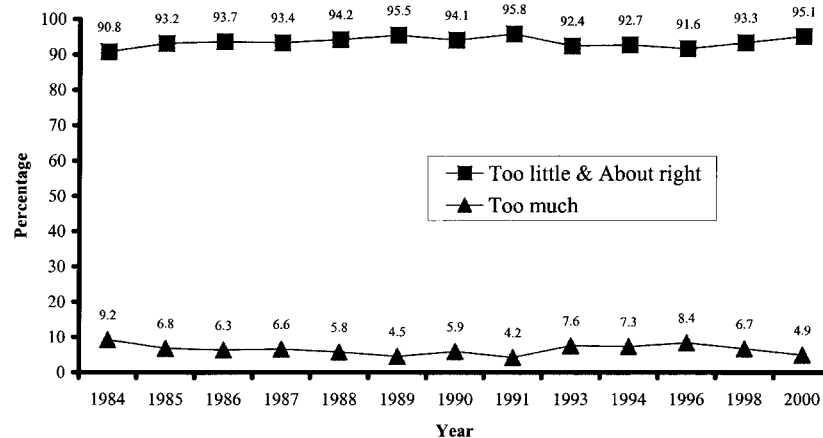
<sup>b</sup> Retirement Confidence Survey, Matthew Greenwald and Associates for EBRI and American Savings Education, 7/97. See Sec. *Ib* of the appendix.

about UFOs, or that they simply meant to acknowledge that some flying objects are indeed unidentified. Moreover, contrary to the impression conveyed by many policy elites, the UFO–Social Security comparison was not actually made by respondents themselves; it was inferred by the interpreters.

A survey conducted in 1997 for EBRI asked a single question of young adults aged 18–34: “Which do you have greater confidence in—receiving Social Security benefits after retirement or that alien life from outer space exists?” The results contradicted the UFO story: fully 63 percent expressed greater confidence in Social Security, while 33 percent chose alien life (see table 2). As Jacobs and Shapiro (1998a) opine, “the true state of public opinion on Social Security turns out to be more complicated than this popular sound bite suggests—a lot more complicated. . . . It has as much to do with leading (or misleading) poll questions as it does with the merits of the actual plan.”

The UFO finding could have been criticized in the 3 years before the 1997 EBRI survey. Yet in the statements we read in congressional hearings, no one, either before or after 1997, offered information to criticize, correct, or update the UFO story. Further, in the years following 1997, policy elites continued to cite it (e.g., Breaux 1998; Clinton 1998b; and Wyden 1998). Why? Were policy elites truly unaware of the flaws in the original interpretation and unaware of its contradiction by later data? Or did everyone, supporter and critic of Social Security alike, find it useful to accept the UFO





**Figure 5.** Support for Social Security spending, 1984–2000, as shown by percentage responding that we spend “too little” or “about the right amount” versus “too much money” on Social Security. Source: The data are from NORC General Social Surveys. The question was, “We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I’m going to name some of these problems, and for each one I’d like you to tell me whether you think we’re spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. Are we spending too much money, too little money, or about the right amount on Social Security?” Note that this question was not asked in 1992, 1995, 1997, and 1999. Percentages shown do not include “Don’t know” and other volunteered responses.

canard for their own purposes? We do not know. But once the dramatic sound bite about UFOs was quoted and repeated by policy elites it took on a life of its own as conventional wisdom and alternative viewpoints received little or no attention.

*Popularity of Social Security.* On occasion in our data, both Social Security enthusiasts and critics pointed out that Social Security is a highly popular program. The evidence supports such claims.

Beginning in 1984 and continuing in most of its annual General Social Surveys, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) asked a large national sample of respondents, “Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on Social Security?” Support for the program can be defined as saying we are spending “too little” or “about the right amount,” whereas “too much” indicates that the program should be cut back. As figure 5 shows, by this definition, in every one of twelve surveys conducted through

1998, an overwhelming majority—90 percent or more—of the general public supported Social Security.<sup>9</sup>

A similar question was asked each election year between 1984 and 1996 by the National Election Studies (NES): “If you had a say in making up the federal budget this year, for which of the following programs would you like to see spending increased and for which would you like to see spending decreased? . . . Should federal spending on Social Security be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?” If support is defined as saying that spending should be “increased” or “kept about the same,” the NES data tell the same story as NORC’s: 94–97 percent of respondents supported Social Security, while only 3–6 percent wanted to cut spending on the program.

Clearly, the data on support match the claims. Again, however, the fact is that the program’s popularity was rather seldom mentioned.

*Support for changes/reforms/privatization.* Policy elites frequently invoked public opinion to make claims about the public’s readiness for changes or reforms in the program and about their support for partial or full privatization. In apparent harmony with these claims, four PSRA surveys in 1998 and 1999 found that roughly 60 percent of the public said that “big changes” were needed in Social Security to keep it out of trouble in the future. But what kinds of changes?

The picture is murkier when it comes to specifics. Some rather moderate changes recommended by experts (which in various combinations would apparently solve the projected financial problems: see Baker and Weisbrot 1999; Page and Simmons 2000, chap. 3; Social Security Advisory Board 1998, pp. 25–26) include lowering cost-of-living adjustments or COLAs, reducing benefits for the wealthy elderly (i.e., those with incomes over \$60,000), increasing the payroll tax, raising the earnings ceiling or “cap” that exempts all income above a certain level from payroll taxation, raising the age of eligibility for full retirement benefits to 70, and raising the minimum age for receiving reduced benefits from 62 to 65. The results of a 1998 PSRA survey about such options are given in table 3. Only two of the six proposals—reducing benefits for the wealthy and raising the earnings ceiling—received support from more than half the respondents (54 percent and 60 percent, respectively). Clearly, not all proposed changes in the program met with public approval. Those that did actually got rather little attention in the hearings; according to our content analyses, policy elites did not invoke public approval of either reducing benefits for the wealthy or raising the earnings ceiling.

Many policy elites’ invocations of public opinion claimed public support for full or partial privatization. In four PSRA and NPR/Kaiser/JFK School polls in 1998 and 1999, interviewers asked respondents their opinions about

9. To be sure, the steady 90+ percent support figures conceal some shifting back and forth between “too little” and “about the right amount.” After the 1994 Gingrich election, for example, “too little” responses temporarily dropped and “about right” temporarily rose. But “too much” responses have always been restricted to a very small minority of Americans.

**Table 3.** Social Security Policy Option Preferences ( $N = 2,008$ )

| Policy Option   | August 1998 Responses (%) |
|---|---------------------------|
| Cut benefits by lowering cost-of-living adjustment:     |                           |
| Strongly or moderately favor                            | 34                        |
| Strongly or moderately oppose                           | 61                        |
| Neither/don't know                                      | 5                         |
| Reduce benefits for the wealthy (income over \$60,000): |                           |
| Strongly or moderately favor                            | 54                        |
| Strongly or moderately oppose                           | 40                        |
| Neither/don't know                                      | 6                         |
| Increase payroll tax from 6.2% to 6.7%:                 |                           |
| Strongly or moderately favor                            | 40                        |
| Strongly or moderately oppose                           | 54                        |
| Neither/don't know                                      | 6                         |
| Raise earnings ceiling from \$68,000 to \$100,000:      |                           |
| Strongly or moderately favor                            | 60                        |
| Strongly or moderately oppose                           | 29                        |
| Neither/don't know                                      | 11                        |
| Raise the retirement age to 70:                         |                           |
| Strongly or moderately favor                            | 23                        |
| Strongly or moderately oppose                           | 74                        |
| Neither/don't know                                      | 3                         |
| Gradually increase early retirement age from 62 to 65:  |                           |
| Strongly or moderately favor                            | 47                        |
| Strongly or moderately oppose                           | 47                        |
| Neither/don't know                                      | 6                         |

SOURCE.—PSRA.

various sorts of privatization. A majority rejected full privatization: 57 percent opposed “allowing workers to take all of their Social Security taxes out of the Social Security system and invest them on their own.”<sup>10</sup> Pluralities or majorities also rejected the idea of shifting some of the Social Security trust fund from government bonds to investment in the stock market. But majorities ranging from 52 to 65 percent said they favored having individuals invest “some” or “a portion” of their payroll taxes themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Since March 1996, at least 19 survey questions with various wordings have been asked about partial privatization. As table 4 shows, most of these surveys showed a majority—often quite a substantial majority—favoring privatization. This would seem to uphold policy elites’ claims.

But on closer inspection, support for privatization appears to hinge on how

10. NPR/Kaiser/JFK School of Government poll, 3/4–3/24/99,  $n = 1,203$ .

11. NPR/Kaiser/JFK, 3/99; PSRA 8/98, 2/99, 5/99.

**Table 4.** Support for Partial Privatization of Social Security When No Risks Are Considered

|                              | % in Survey |        |                       |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------|-----------------------|
|                              | Favor       | Oppose | No Opinion/Don't Know |
| Mar. 1996 <sup>a</sup>       | 72          | 13     | 15                    |
| June 1996 <sup>b</sup>       | 69          | 15     | 16                    |
| June 1996 <sup>c</sup>       | 74          | 13     | 13                    |
| Apr. 1998 <sup>d</sup>       | 80          | 16     | 4                     |
| Apr. 1998 <sup>e</sup>       | 66          | 20     | 13                    |
| Apr. 1998 <sup>f</sup>       | 76          | 20     | 4                     |
| May 1998 <sup>g</sup>        | 64          | 32     | 4                     |
| June 1998 <sup>h</sup>       | 69          | 20     | 11                    |
| Dec. 1998 <sup>i</sup>       | 74          | 22     | 5                     |
| July–Sept. 1999 <sup>j</sup> | 70          | 22     | 8                     |
| Jan. 2000 <sup>k</sup>       | 62          | 33     | 5                     |
| May 2000 <sup>l</sup>        | 64          | 31     | 5                     |
| May 2000 <sup>m</sup>        | 53          | 38     | 9                     |
| June 2000 <sup>n</sup>       | 65          | 30     | 5                     |
| June 2000 <sup>o</sup>       | 51          | 36     | 13                    |
| Sept. 2000 <sup>p</sup>      | 59          | 37     | 4                     |
| Sept. 2000 <sup>q</sup>      | 53          | 39     | 8                     |
| Oct. 2000 <sup>r</sup>       | 66          | 30     | 4                     |
| Oct. 2000 <sup>s</sup>       | 58          | 35     | 8                     |

<sup>a</sup> Public Opinion Strategies for the Cato Institute, 3/27–3/31/96, *N* = 800. See Sec. IIa of the appendix.

<sup>b</sup> Public Opinion Strategies for the Cato Institute, 6/12–6/16/96, *N* = 800. See Sec. IIb of the appendix.

<sup>c</sup> Public Opinion Strategies for the Cato Institute, 6/12–6/16/96, *N* = 800. See Sec. IIc of the appendix.

<sup>d</sup> I.C.R. Survey Research Group for Associated Press, 4/27–4/31/98, *N* = 1,012. See Sec. II d of the appendix.

<sup>e</sup> American Viewpoint National Monitor Survey, 4/98, *N* = 1,000. See Sec. IIe of the appendix.

<sup>f</sup> Yankelovich Partners, Inc. survey for *Time/CNN*, 4/8–4/9/98, *N* = 1,011. See Sec. II f of the appendix.

<sup>g</sup> Chilton Research Services/Harvard University, 5/6–5/10/98, *N* = 1,014. See Sec. IIg of the appendix.

<sup>h</sup> PSRA, 6/4–6/8/98, *N* = 1,012. See Sec. IIh of the appendix.

<sup>i</sup> Associated Press, 12/2–12/6/98, *N* = 1,006. See Sec. IIi of the appendix.

<sup>j</sup> PSRA, 7/14–9/9/99, *N* = 3,973. See Sec. IIj of the appendix.

<sup>k</sup> Gallup Organization, 1/13–1/16/00, *N* = 1,027. See Sec. IIk of the appendix.

<sup>l</sup> ABC News/*Washington Post*, 5/7–5/10/00, *N* = 1,068. See Sec. IIl of the appendix.

<sup>m</sup> Opinion Dynamics, 5/10–5/11/00, *N* = 900. See Sec. II m of the appendix.

<sup>n</sup> Gallup Organization, 6/6–6/7/00, *N* = 1,059. See Sec. II n of the appendix.

<sup>o</sup> PSRA, 6/22–6/23/00, *N* = 750. See Sec. II o of the appendix.

<sup>p</sup> ABC News/*Washington Post*, 9/4–9/6/00, *N* = 1,065. See Sec. II p of the appendix.

<sup>q</sup> Yankelovich Partners, Inc., 9/6–9/7/00, *N* = 1,278. See Sec. II q of the appendix.

<sup>r</sup> Gallup Organization, 10/25–10/28/00, *N* = 1,004. See Sec. II r of the appendix.

<sup>s</sup> ABC News, 10/28–10/30/00, *N* = 1,020. See Sec. II p of the appendix.

**Table 5.** Support for Partial Privatization of Social Security When Risks Are Considered

|                        | % in Survey |        |                       |
|------------------------|-------------|--------|-----------------------|
|                        | Favor       | Oppose | No Opinion/Don't Know |
| Dec. 1996 <sup>a</sup> | 36          | 56     | 8                     |
| Jan. 1997 <sup>b</sup> | 22          | 61     | 17                    |
| Mar. 1997 <sup>c</sup> | 35          | 63     | 2                     |
| Apr. 1998 <sup>d</sup> | 52          | 41     | 7                     |
| Oct. 1998 <sup>e</sup> | 43          | 52     | 5                     |
| Mar. 1999 <sup>f</sup> | 44          | 51     | 5                     |

<sup>a</sup> Yankelovich Partners, Inc., 12/11–12/12/96,  $N = 818$ . See Sec. IIIa of the appendix.

<sup>b</sup> Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1/25–1/27/97,  $N = 1,002$ . See Sec. IIIb of the appendix.

<sup>c</sup> *Washington Post*, 3/13–3/23/97,  $N = 1,309$ . See Sec. IIIc of the appendix.

<sup>d</sup> Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 4/18–4/20/98,  $N = 1,004$ . See Sec. III d of the appendix.

<sup>e</sup> Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 10/24–10/28/98,  $N = 1,025$ . See Sec. IIIe of the appendix.

<sup>f</sup> Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 3/4–3/7/99,  $N = 2,012$ . See Sec. IIIe of the appendix.

privatization is framed in the survey questions. Several of these survey questions (especially the early ones sponsored by the Cato Institute) alluded to various benefits of privatization and offered reassurances (“no reduction in benefits for current Social Security recipients,” “choice of staying in” the current system). Some alluded to a need for action (“if nothing is changed, the system will go broke”). But none of these items mentioned any possible costs or risks of privatization. Given that the idea of privatizing Social Security was at that time new to most Americans and that few had much information about it, one could argue for the use of balanced questions listing both advantages and disadvantages. Questions like Cato’s that only alluded to benefits of privatization or the need for action were likely to overestimate support for privatization. Even neutral questions that just brought up the idea of free choice of retirement investments (inherently attractive to individualistic Americans), without mentioning pros and cons, might well overestimate the degree to which the public would come to support privatization as it learned more about the idea.

Rather early on (beginning in December 1996) a few surveys did mention possible risks or costs of privatization (“others think . . . too risky”; “too unpredictable”; “higher payroll taxes and deficits”) along with possible benefits (“higher investment returns”; “more money for retirement”). As table 5 shows, surveys mentioning risks uniformly showed majorities opposed to partial privatization. Additional data (not shown here) indicate that the mention of other possible costs of privatization—high administrative costs and/or severely restricted investment choices for private accounts, for example, or cuts in guar-

anteed benefits and/or high “transition costs”—severely erodes the number of pro-privatization responses (see Cook and Jacobs 2002; Page 2000, esp. p. 199).

The importance of question wording is made starkly clear by the results of a May 1999 PSRA survey that reported that 58 percent of Americans favored a system that would include private accounts, while only 33 percent opposed it. The results were almost exactly reversed when the same survey asked respondents to choose between a program that guaranteed a monthly benefit based on lifetime earnings, as under the current system, and a program that would allow individual investment in the stock market with no guarantee. Given the latter choice, 59 percent favored the guaranteed payment, while only 33 percent supported private investment. As Evans Witt (president of PSRA) said, “The American people seem to favor the idea of individual retirement accounts in theory. The question is, how do you do it, and what does it cost, and does it put my benefits at risk?” (Stevenson 2000, p. 1).

Among policy elites’ invocations of public opinion we found very little questioning of the proposition that the American public supported partial privatization. Elites’ discussion of privatization did not mention the fact that poll evidence supporting this proposal was based on survey questions that did not mention the risks of privatization.

#### EVIDENCE FOR ELITES’ GENERAL AND SPECIFIC CLAIMS

Earlier, we reported that a large majority of elites’ public opinion claims—70 percent of the president’s and 73 percent of congressional witnesses’—were general, using words like “Americans support,” “the public favors,” “many,” or “a lot.” Only a minority of their claims involved specific references to the aggregate distribution of public opinion. As noted, we examined each claim made about public opinion, compared it with the data from all the public opinion questions we found between 1990 and 1999, and coded whether each was clearly supported by evidence, the evidence was mixed (i.e., very slim majorities in support or opposition), or there was little or no evidence to support the claim. It is useful to separate the results by the specificity or generality of claims.

As table 6 indicates, specific claims about public opinion made by both the president and the congressional witnesses were likely to be backed by at least some evidence (mixed or clear-cut). That is, when policy elites used either specific percentages or words like “majority” or “minority,” there were likely to be some poll data in the public domain to back them up.<sup>12</sup> We found clear-cut poll data substantiating 69 percent of the specific claims made in

12. The number of claims backed by evidence may of course be somewhat higher than we were able to code using the poll data available to us. Presidents historically have conducted their own private surveys, as have interest groups like AARP. Some policy elites who invoked public opinion may have known things that publicly available polls did not reveal. But the vast number of public polls reduces the likelihood of this.

**Table 6.** Claims about Public Opinion by Policy Elites: Level of Generality and Evidence

| Evidence       | Percentage of Presidential Claims (Column %) |                              |                             | Percentage of Congressional Claims (Column %) |                              |                              |
|----------------|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|
|                | General<br>( <i>N</i> = 35) <sup>a</sup>     | Specific<br>( <i>N</i> = 15) | Total %<br>( <i>N</i> = 50) | General<br>( <i>N</i> = 193) <sup>a</sup>     | Specific<br>( <i>N</i> = 71) | Total %<br>( <i>N</i> = 264) |
| Clear-cut      | 6  | 27                           | 12                          | 32  | 69                           | 42                           |
| Mixed          | 14   | 47                           | 24                          | 17  | 17                           | 17                           |
| Little to none | 80   | 27                           | 64                          | 52  | 14                           | 42                           |
| Total %        | 100  | 100                          | 100                         | 100   | 100                          | 100                          |

<sup>a</sup> The *N*s refer to number of claims about public opinion.

congressional hearings; for only 14 percent of the specific claims could we find little or no data. But President Clinton’s specific claims, despite his access to an elaborate White House public opinion apparatus, were much less often (only 27 percent of the time) supported by clear-cut evidence.

Moreover, as table 6 shows, on the much more frequent occasions when the president or congressional witnesses made general claims about public opinion, little or no evidence usually existed to back up their claims. This was true of 52 percent of the general claims by congressional witnesses and of fully 80 percent of the general claims by President Clinton.

It is understandable that specific claims tended to be supported by evidence; presumably politicians and experts want to avoid the embarrassment of outright contradiction by easily available facts. But why such a feeble level of support for the general claims? In some cases—we cannot know how many—the speakers may have deliberately misrepresented the public as agreeing with their own preferences. Others may simply have guessed, or passed along unfounded generalizations they had heard or read. Still others may have relied upon nonsurvey evidence, from selected constituents, interest groups, newspaper editorials, town meetings, or party activists with their “ears to the ground” (Herbst 1998; Kingdon 1984). (We found that many comments about public opinion referred to “all the people I’ve talked to,” “everyone I know,” “people in my district,” “people who care,” or “seniors I visited.”) Whatever the source of their general invocations of public opinion, we could find no corroborating polling evidence.

**Conclusion**

Even on the highly salient and much contested issue of Social Security, the evidence concerning our hypotheses is quite mixed. In harmony with hy-

pothesis 1, policy elites did invoke public opinion. That was especially true in 1997, 1998, and 1999, when Congress held many hearings and President Clinton began to put heavy emphasis on the issue. Many of these invocations of public opinion (44 percent of Clinton's and 38 percent of those in congressional hearings) involved public confidence in or concern about the future of the program. Others involved general or specific changes in the program, such as privatization. Rather few touched on the very high level of public approval of and support for Social Security.

Contrary to hypothesis 2, however, rather few of the presidential or congressional claims about public opinion were specific. Few cited percentages or even described the distribution of opinion to the extent of using words like "most" or "a majority of." Most claims involved rather vague assertions on the order of "Americans I have talked to feel that. . . ." This may be understandable in presidential addresses to broad public audiences, but it is more puzzling in the highly elite forum of congressional hearings, which often include quite technical testimony. Nor did hypothesis 3 fare very well. Claims by policy elites that clearly and directly contradicted the survey evidence were rare. However, only with the rather few specific claims by congressional elites did we find much clear-cut support in the available polling data. Surprisingly seldom could we find clear-cut support for the elites' general claims. This was true even though data were abundant (some 2,352 relevant survey questions were asked during the 1990s).

Moreover, some claims about public opinion dominated in the records we examined. They painted a picture of public views that tended to support those who claimed that Social Security is bankrupt, that there is little public confidence in it, and that privatization is the correct solution. These views could have been contested with other evidence from polling archives, but for the most part they were not. Methodological issues that might have been raised about such findings as the popular UFO question were not considered until several years after the poll was done.

The implications of our findings for democratic responsiveness are not entirely straightforward. Perhaps one should not expect public figures to cite precise poll results and urge the people's representatives to follow the popular will. And general statements about what "the people" think may be harmless, so long as they are not directly contradicted by the evidence. But incorrect or misleading assertions about public opinion by policy elites are disturbing, especially if they go uncontested. They are likely to interfere with efforts to take the public's actual views into account.

Our results for the Social Security case, involving a highly visible, hotly contested, and well-polled issue, suggest a fortiori that specific, data-based elite invocations of public opinion may be even less common on other, lower-visibility and less-polled issues. In support of the view that Colasanto (1997) expressed in her AAPOR presidential address, our results also suggest that



systematic monitoring of polls in policy debates might help to ensure that a more complete record of public sentiment is considered in policy debates.

## Appendix

### Survey Details

#### I. Surveys Used in Table 2

*a)* Third Millennium Survey, Luntz Research Companies and Mark A. Siegel and Associates, 9/8–9/10/94. A total of 500 18–34-year-olds were interviewed to get the “Generation X” perspective on Social Security. The Social Security question was the sixth item, and the UFO question was asked as the fourteenth item. The question for Social Security was, “Do you think Social Security will still exist by the time you retire?” The question for the UFO item was, “And one final question, and I ask you to take this seriously—Do you think UFOs exist?”

*b)* Retirement Confidence Survey, Matthew Greenwald and Associates for EBRI and American Savings Education, 7/97. This survey compared beliefs about the existence of Social Security and UFOs in the same question. It asked 18–34-year-olds (*N* unavailable), “Which do you have greater confidence in . . . receiving Social Security benefits after retirement or that alien life from outer space exists?”

#### II. Surveys Used in Table 4

*a)* Public Opinion Strategies for the Cato Institute, 3/27–3/31/96, *N* = 800. Includes only national registered voters likely to vote. The question was, “Now that you have heard all six parts of the new proposal to change the Social Security system, do you favor, oppose, or have no opinion of the entire plan, or would you like me to read the key points of the plan to you again before you make a decision? [Read plan only if respondent asks.] People would be allowed to keep and invest the amount they now pay in Social Security taxes to save for their own retirement. You would decide how to invest the money, with some restrictions to limit very risky investments. Money could not be drawn until retirement and any money left in your account when you die becomes part of your inheritance. There will be no reduction in benefits for current Social Security recipients. People under age 65 years old but over age 18 would have the choice of staying in the current Social Security system or moving to the new privatized system. Those choosing the new system will receive some partial benefits under the old system. [If favor/oppose, ask:] Would that be strongly [favor/oppose] or just somewhat [favor/oppose]? [If no opinion, ask:] Which way do you lean? Do you lean to favor the proposal or do you lean to oppose the proposal?”

*b)* Public Opinion Strategies for the Cato Institute, 6/12–6/16/96, *N* = 800. Includes only national registered voters likely to vote. The question was, “Now that you have had an opportunity to hear more about Proposal B [to change the Social Security system], the proposal that would allow you to invest your Social Security taxes into your own personal retirement account like an IRA (Individual Retirement Account) or 401K, do you favor, oppose, or have no opinion of the proposal? [If favor/oppose,

ask:] Would that be strongly [favor/oppose] or just somewhat [favor/oppose]? [If no opinion, ask:] Which way do you lean? Do you lean to favor the proposal or do you lean to oppose the proposal?"

c) Public Opinion Strategies for the Cato Institute, 6/12–6/16/96,  $N = 800$ . Includes only national registered voters likely to vote. The question was, "Now that you have heard all seven parts (people would be allowed to keep and invest the amount they now pay in Social Security taxes to save for their own personal retirement, you would decide how to invest the money with some restrictions to limit very risky investments, money could not be drawn until retirement, any money left in your account when you die becomes part of your inheritance, there will be no reduction in benefits for current Social Security recipients, people under age 65 years old but over age 18 would have the choice of staying in the current Social Security system or moving to the new privatized system, those choosing the new system will receive some partial benefits under the old system) of Proposal B (to change the Social Security system), do you favor or oppose, or have no opinion of the entire plan, or would you like me to read the key points of the plan to you again before you make a decision? [If favor/oppose, ask:] Would that be strongly [favor/oppose] or just somewhat [favor/oppose]? [If no opinion, ask:] Which way do you lean? Do you lean to favor the proposal or do you lean to oppose the proposal?"

d) I.C.R. Survey Research Group for Associated Press, 4/27–4/31/98,  $N = 1,012$ . The question was, "I'm going to read some proposals that have been made for changes in the Social Security system. For each proposal, tell me whether you favor or oppose it. . . . Letting workers shift some of their Social Security tax payments into personal retirement accounts that they would invest on their own."

e) American Viewpoint National Monitor Survey, 4/98,  $N = 1,000$ . The question was, "As you may know, each year there are more and more retirees collecting Social Security benefits and fewer workers whose payroll taxes fund the system. In fact, by the year 2012, the government will be paying out more Social Security benefits than it is collecting in payroll taxes and if nothing is changed, the system will go broke by the year 2029. As you may know, workers are now required to contribute 12.5 percent of their income to Social Security. Would you favor or oppose changing the formula so that they would continue to pay the same amount toward their retirement but just 10.5 percent would go to Social Security and the other 2 percent would be used by workers to invest in their own private retirement accounts? [If favor or oppose, ask:] Is that strongly favor/oppose or somewhat?"

f) Yankelovich Partners, Inc. survey for *Time*/CNN, 4/8–4/9/98,  $N = 1,011$ . The question was, "Do you favor or oppose allowing Americans to put a portion of their Social Security taxes into a personal savings account to be used for retirement?"

g) Chilton Research Services/Harvard University, 5/6–5/10/98,  $N = 1,014$ . The question was, "I am going to read you a list of some ways that have been suggested to deal with the future financial problems of Social Security. For each one, please tell me if you would favor or oppose such a proposal. How about . . . people having individual accounts and making their own investments with a portion of their Social Security payments?"

h) PSRA, 6/4–6/8/98,  $N = 1,012$ . The question was, "Generally, do you favor or oppose this proposal (which would allow Americans to put a portion of their Social Security taxes into a personal savings account to be used for retirement)?"

i) Associated Press, 12/2–12/6/98,  $N = 1,006$ . The question was, "I'm going to

read some proposals that have been made for changes in the Social Security system. For each proposal, please tell me whether you favor it or oppose it. . . . Letting workers shift some of their Social Security tax payments into personal retirement accounts that they would invest on their own.”

j) PSRA, 7/14–9/9/99,  $N = 3,973$ . The question was, “Generally, do you favor or oppose this proposal (which would allow Americans to put a portion of their Social Security taxes into a personal savings account to be used for retirement)?”

k) Gallup Organization, 1/13–1/16/00,  $N = 1,027$ . The question was, “A proposal has been made that would allow or require people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?”

l) ABC News/*Washington Post*, 5/7–5/10/00,  $N = 1,068$ . The question was, “Would you support or oppose a plan in which people who chose to do so could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market?”

m) Opinion Dynamics, 5/10–5/11/00,  $N = 900$ . The question was, “With regard to Social Security, do you believe it should continue working as it currently does, or do you think people should have the option to invest part of their Social Security contributions themselves?” Choices were continue, option to invest privately, and don’t know.

n) Gallup Organization, 6/6–6/7/00,  $N = 1,059$ . The question was, “A proposal has been made that would allow people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?”

o) PSRA, 6/22–6/23/00,  $N = 750$ . The question was, “As you may know, the [2000] presidential candidates have made some proposals to change or supplement Social Security to help Americans save more money for their retirement. One of these proposals would change Social Security to allow workers to invest some of their Social Security payroll taxes in the stock market. In general, do you favor or oppose this proposal?”

p) ABC News/*Washington Post*, 9/4–9/6/00,  $N = 1,065$ . The question was, “Would you support or oppose a plan in which people who chose to could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market?” Choices were support, oppose, and no opinion.

q) Yankelovich Partners, Inc., 9/6–9/7/00,  $N = 1,278$ . The question was, “Do you favor or oppose allowing individuals to invest a portion of their Social Security taxes in the U.S. (United States) stock market?”

r) Gallup Organization, 10/25–10/28/00,  $N = 1,004$ . The question was, “Suppose that on election day this year [2000] you could vote on key issues as well as candidates. Please tell me whether you would vote for or against each one of the following propositions. Would you vote . . . for or against a law that would allow people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks or bonds?”

s) ABC News, 10/28–10/30/00,  $N = 1,020$ . The question was the same as in item p.

### III. Surveys Used in Table 5

a) Yankelovich Partners, Inc., 12/11–12/12/96,  $N = 818$ . The question was, “Some people favor investing a portion of Social Security tax funds in the stock market because this might lead to higher investment returns. Other people oppose this because

this is too risky. What is your opinion? Do you favor or oppose investing a portion of the tax money collected for Social Security in the stock market?"

b) Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1/25–1/27/97,  $N = 1,002$ . The question was, "This proposal to allow people to invest Social Security contributions in the stock market also includes an increase in the payroll tax for current employees, as well as an increase in the federal deficit, so that benefits to current retirees also can be maintained. Do you think the benefits of allowing people to invest Social Security contributions in the stock market outweigh these costs of higher payroll taxes and deficits, or do you think the costs outweigh the benefits?"

c) *Washington Post*, 3/13–3/23/97,  $N = 1,309$ . The question was, "Some people favor investing a portion of Social Security tax funds in the stock market because this might lead to higher investment returns. Other people oppose this idea because they say the stock market is too unpredictable. What is your opinion? Do you favor or oppose investing a portion of the tax money collected for Social Security in the stock market?"

d) Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 4/18–4/20/98,  $N = 1,004$ . The question was, "One proposal has been made that would allow or require people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Some people think that individuals would have more money for retirement if they were allowed to invest and manage some of their Social Security payroll taxes themselves. Others think that it is too risky and could leave some people without adequate money for retirement if the stock market were to decline in value significantly. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?"

e) Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 10/24–10/28/98,  $N = 1,025$ . National registered voters only. The question was, "A proposal has been made that would allow or require people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Some people think that individuals would have more money for retirement if they were allowed to invest and manage some of their Social Security payroll taxes themselves. Others think that it is too risky and could leave some people without adequate money for retirement if the stock market were to decline in value significantly. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?"

f) Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 3/4–3/7/99,  $N = 2,012$ . The question was the same as in item e.

## References

- Arrow, Kenneth J. (1951) 1963. *Social Choice and Individual Values*. New York: Wiley.
- Baker, Dean, and Mark Weisbrot. 1999. *Social Security: The Phony Crisis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ball, Robert M. 1997. Testimony at hearing, *The Future of Social Security for This Generation and the Next*. Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, March 6.
- Bartels, Larry M. 1991. "Constituency Opinion and Congressional Policy Making: The Reagan Defense Buildup." *American Political Science Review* 85:457–74.
- Black, Duncan. 1958. *The Theory of Committees and Elections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breaux, John. 1998. Remarks at hearing, *The Stock Market and Social Security: The Risks and the Rewards*. Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, April 22.
- Clinton, William J. 1998a. Remarks at a roundtable discussion with employees of Therma, Inc., San Jose, CA, May 1.

- . 1998b. Remarks at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, January 28.
- . 1998c. Remarks on departure for Capitol Hill, Washington, DC, February 10.
- . 1999a. Address before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union, Washington, DC, January 19.
- . 1999b. Remarks at Brooke Grove Elementary School, Olney, MD, September 7.
- Colasanto, Diane. 1997. "A Proposal for a New Role and New Voice for AAPOR." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61:523–30.
- Cook, Fay Lomax, and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2002. "Assessing Assumptions about Americans' Attitudes toward Social Security: Popular Claims Meet Hard Data." In *The Future of Social Insurance*, ed. Peter Edelman and Dallus L. Salisbury, pp. 82–110. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Davis, Otto A., and Melvin Hinich. 1966. "A Mathematical Model of Policy Formation in a Democratic Society." In *Mathematical Applications in Political Science*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph L. Bernd, pp. 175–205. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Erikson, Robert S., Gerald C. Wright, and John P. McIver. 1993. *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Geer, John G. 1996. *From Tea Leaves to Opinion Polls: A Theory of Democratic Leadership*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ginsberg, Benjamin. 1986. *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power*. New York: Basic.
- Glassman, James. 1998. Testimony at hearing, *Enhancing Retirement through Individual Investment Choices*. Committee on Commerce, U.S. House of Representatives, July 24.
- Gramlich, Edward M. 1997. Testimony at hearing, *Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for FY98, vol. II: Proposal for Long-Term Reform (pp. 91–174)*. Committee on Budget, U.S. Senate, January 29.
- Grassley, Charles. 1997. Remarks at hearing, *2010 and Beyond: Preparing Social Security for the Baby Boomers*. Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, August 26.
- Hagel, Charles. 1998. Remarks at hearing, *Stock Market and Social Security: The Risks and Rewards*. Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, April 22.
- Hartley, Thomas, and Bruce Russett. 1992. "Public Opinion and the Common Defense: Who Governs Military Spending in the United States?" *American Political Science Review* 86: 905–15.
- Herbst, Susan. 1993. *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1998. *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1994. "Issues, Candidate Image, and Priming: The Use of Private Polls in Kennedy's 1960 Presidential Campaign." *American Political Science Review* 88 (September): 527–40.
- . 1995. "The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59 (Summer): 163–95.
- . 1998a. "More Social Security Bunk: UFO Stories." *New Republic*, August 10, pp. 12–13.
- . 1998b. "Myths and Misunderstandings about Public Opinion toward Social Security." In *Framing the Social Security Debate*, ed. R. Douglas Arnold, Michael J. Graetz, and Alicia H. Munnell, pp. 355–88. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- . 2000. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kerrey, Robert. 1997. Remarks at hearing, *2010 and Beyond: Preparing Social Security for the Baby Boomers*. Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, August 26.
- Kingdon, John W. 1984. *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Kingson, Eric R., and John B. Williamson. 1999. "Why Privatizing Social Security Is a Bad Idea." In *The Generational Equity Debate*, ed. John B. Williamson, Diane M. Watts-Roy, and Eric R. Kingson, pp. 204–20. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kull, Steven, and I. M. Destler. 1999. *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lukefahr, Robert. 1994. Remarks at hearing, *Proposals for Alternate Investment of the Social*

- Security Trust Fund Reserves*. Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, October 4.
- Marmor, Theodore R. 1997. Testimony at hearing, *Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for FY98, vol. II: Proposal for Long-Term Reform (pp. 91–174)*. Committee on Budget, U.S. Senate, January 29.
- McKelvey, Richard D. 1976. “Intransitivities in Multidimensional Voting Models and Some Implications for Agenda Control.” *Journal of Economic Theory* 12:472–82.
- Monroe, Alan D. 1979. “Consistency between Public Preferences and National Policy Decisions.” *American Politics Quarterly* 7:3–19.
- . 1998. “Public Opinion and Public Policy, 1980–1993.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62(1): 6–28.
- Page, Benjamin I. 2000. “Is Social Security Reform Ready for the American Public?” In *Social Security and Medicare: Individual versus Collective Risk and Responsibility*, ed. Shelia Burke, Eric Kingson, and Uwe Reinhardt, pp. 183–207. Washington, DC: National Academy of Social Insurance.
- Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1983. “Effects of Public Opinion on Policy.” *American Political Science Review* 77(1):175–90.
- . 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Page, Benjamin I., and James R. Simmons. 2000. *What Government Can Do: Dealing with Poverty and Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 1997. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schultz, Charles L. 1995. Testimony at hearing, *Privatization of the Social Security Old Age and Survivors Insurance Program*. Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate, August 2.
- Skidmore, Max J. 1999. *Social Security and Its Enemies*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Social Security Advisory Board. 1998. *Social Security: Why Action Should Be Taken Soon*. Washington, DC: S.S.A.B.
- Social Security and Medicare Boards of Trustees. 1999. *Status of the Social Security and Medicare Programs: A Summary of the 1999 Annual Report*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Stevenson, Richard W. 2000. “The 2000 Campaign: The Issues; Bush to Advocate Private Accounts in Social Security.” *New York Times*, May 1.
- Stimson, James A., Michael B. MacKuen, and Robert S. Erikson. 1995. “Dynamic Representation.” *American Political Science Review* 89(3):543–65.
- Tanner, Michael. 1996. Testimony at hearing, *Social Security Reform Options: Preparing for the 21st Century*. Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, September 24.
- Traugott, Michael. 2000. “Polling in the Public’s Interest.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64:374–84.
- U.S. Office of Management and Budget. 2001a. *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2002*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- . 2001b. *A Citizen’s Guide to the Federal Budget: Fiscal Year 2002*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Wlezien, Christopher. 1995. “The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending.” *American Journal of Political Science* 39(4):981–1000.
- Wyden, Ron. 1998. Remarks at hearing, *Stock Market and Social Security: The Risks and the Rewards*. Special Committee on Aging, U.S. Senate, April 22.