

POLLS ABROAD

COMPARATIVE PUBLIC OPINION

By Robert Y. Shapiro

In 1973 Anthony King observed that it was a reflection on the interests of political scientists that no one since 1951--when Hadley Cantril and Mildred Strunk published *Public Opinion, 1935-1946*--had compiled, let alone analyzed, basic public opinion information on a comparative, cross-national basis.¹ Despite the tremendous growth of opinion research over the last sixteen years, the deficiency King identified is still in evidence. Researchers need to examine the dynamics of public opinion much more extensively in comparative terms.

Two sets of developments internationally are now spurring interest in public opinion. One is the movement away from authoritarian government toward democracy all around the world—from Latin America to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and, at least for a time, China. Since democracy and public opinion are intimately related to each other—although political theorists (and others, including George Gallup) have disagreed about what this relationship is or should be—survey researchers have emerged (or reemerged) in these countries. In some instances, they have desired to help democracy along; in others, involving government-sponsored or controlled polling, they have hoped to confront it more effectively. This kind of opinion polling—what is learned from it and what influences it—has added a new dimension to politics.²

The debate in the West over foreign policy and national security issues has also heightened interest in comparative public opinion, as policymakers have had to reckon with the public's reactions in a rapidly changing environment. Academics and other analysts have examined the trends over time in both public and elite attitudes toward national security matters in a number of countries.³ This is certainly one example of the comparative research King had in mind. In an extensive review of studies done over the last fifteen years, I found more work in this area than in

any other.⁴

Thus far, the best comparative studies of trends in public opinion on domestic issues have dealt with nuclear energy, civil liberties and political tolerance, "postmaterialist" values, and social welfare policies. This work has revealed both striking similarities and marked differences across nations. As to the differences, attitudes in industrial countries toward nuclear power have not responded at all the same in the wake of nuclear accidents—as for example, comparison of French-US attitudes before and after the accident at Three Mile Island shows.⁵ The public's shift to the right on social welfare and other issues initially occurred more dramatically in Great Britain than in the United States, contributing to Margaret Thatcher's ascendancy and popularity. But similar to the liberal rebound in American opinion that took place during Ronald Reagan's administration against further spending cuts, British public opinion reversed itself substantially, rejecting further retrenchment of the welfare state. There is some limited evidence that comparable conservative shifts followed by liberal reversals occurred in other countries as well.⁶

No doubt, comparative research on opinions and values will increase as opinion polling increases further worldwide. Adding more of these data to archives such as the Roper Center will help spur such research. Analyzing the data will present all of the problems survey researchers have confronted in the past—problems further compounded by the need to take into account nuances in the various languages and the contrasting social and political contexts. If the appearance of new professional journals is an indicator, the recent publication of the inaugural volume of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* suggests that King's challenge to political scientists and

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others may soon be met. And it ought to be.

NOTES

1. Anthony King, "Ideas, Institutions and the Policies of Governments: A Comparative Analysis: Part I," *British Journal of Political Science*, August 1973, pp. 412-13 and fn. 8; Hadley Cantril with Mildred Strunk, *Public Opinion 1935-1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951).
2. Polling and the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy was examined, to cite one important example, at a recent conference at Columbia University on The Southern Cone Public Opinion Project in Latin America: "Democracy and Public Opinion: The First Conference on the Cono Sur Project," April 21, 1989, New York.
3. See Richard C. Eichenberg, *Public Opinion and National Security in Western Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Bruce Russett and Thomas W. Graham, "Public Opinion and National Security Policy: Relationships and Impacts," in Manus Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1988).
4. Robert Y. Shapiro and John T. Young, "Public Opinion Toward Social Welfare Policies: The United States in Comparative Perspective," in Samuel Long, ed., *Research in Micropolitics, Public Opinion*, vol. 3 (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, Inc., 1990, forthcoming, pp. 143-186).
5. James M. Jasper, "High Technology and Public Opinion in Comparative Perspective," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, 1986.
6. Robert Y. Shapiro and John T. Young, "Public Opinion and the Welfare State: The United States in Comparative Perspective," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1989, pp. 60-65.

WHAT ROLE FOR THE STATE? (OR, THE US IS DIFFERENT)

QUESTION: "On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to..."

" Provide a job for everyone who wants one. "

	US	Austria	Germany	Italy	UK
Definitely should be	13	45	35	51	37
Probably should be	20	36	45	37	32
Probably should not be	33	12	15	7	16
Definitely should not be	28	3	3	3	11
Can't choose	6	5	2	2	4

" Reduce income differences between the rich and poor. "

Definitely should be	15	38	26	46	46
Probably should be	21	34	37	35	25
Probably should not be	25	15	24	9	14
Definitely should not be	29	5	7	5	10
Can't choose	10	8	7	4	6

NOTE: Surveys done in countries shown in 1985 (except Austria, where it was done in 1986) as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP).