

## Do Elites Control Public Opinion and Public Policy?

Elite theorists argue that mass public opinion is largely inconsequential in the ultimate shaping of public policy. Rather, it is the thin strata of the politically informed and politically active through which policy agendas and norms are established. Dye and Zeigler's *Irony of Democracy*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole, 1987), makes a strong case for the power of elite opinion:

*Opinions flow downward from elites to masses. Public opinion rarely affects elite behavior, but elite behavior shapes public opinion. Elites are relatively unconstrained by public opinion for several reasons. First, few people among the masses have opinions on most policy questions confronting the nation's decision makers. Second, public opinion is very unstable; it can change in a matter of weeks in response to "news" events precipitated by elites. Third, elites do not have a clear perception of mass opinion. Most communications that decision makers receive are from other elites – newsmakers, interest-group leaders, influential community leaders – not from ordinary citizens. (p. 164).*

Dye and Zeigler elaborate on the above points, noting that polls elicit "doorstep opinions" (poorly thought out responses by citizens who feel they should have some opinion on an issue, even if they really know little about the topic). Second, public opinion's "instability" characteristic means that consistent opinions are rare among the mass public, accounting for less than 20 percent of the general population. Finally, the concept of intra-elite communications means that elites receive opinion messages that have an "upper class" bias, that is, friends, wealthy contributors, educated opinion leaders, and so on, most of whom have congruent public attitudes. As Dye and Zeigler put it, "people who initiate communication with decision makers, by writing or calling or visiting their representatives, are decidedly more educated or affluent than the average citizen." (p. 165).

In reference to the central issue of elite response to mass opinion, the authors reinforce their argument of elite determinism:

*When government policy and public opinion are in agreement, is it because the policy adapted to prevailing opinion or because decision makers molded opinion to accept predetermined policy? These questions are difficult to answer, yet so often are policies enacted in the face of widespread public opposition, which eventually melts away into acquiescence, that public opinion seems to follow elite decisions rather than the other way around. (p. 165).*

Dye and Zeigler offer national policy on civil rights, as formulated by decisions from the courts, Congress, and the executive branch, as proof of elite preferences dominating contrary mass attitudes. Accordingly, the 1954 Brown decision on school integration, the Civil Rights act of 1968 banning discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, and judicial support for busing to achieve racial balances

(voters have consistently rejected busing in several state referenda) were all initiated against the backdrop of a hostile mass opinion framework. As the authors argue, "elite support for civil rights at the national level is not a response to mass opinion." (p. 166).

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Could you conclude from the Dye and Zeigler account that elites are more committed to democracy than members of the mass public? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of a present-day example, like the Civil Rights example mentioned above, which suggests that elite public opinion is out of sync with the opinions and interests of the masses? Explain.
3. Can you think of any recent national policies that were changed or created as a result of massive public protest to or outcry against elite opinion?