Political Science 17.20
Introduction to American Politics

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Citizens and Politics
Lecture 12 (March 19, 2013)
2 Things Adam Berinsky Knows About Mass Opinion

1. “Most people, most of the time, do **not pay attention** to politics.”

   **BUT. . .**

2. “Most people will **answer any question** you ask them.”
Case in Point

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=3gXOV_XWJck
Politics is a Sideshow in Most People’s Lives

- Unlike political elites (or political scientists), most people do not care very much about politics. They tune in episodically, if at all.
- Becoming politically informed is costly and provides little benefit to the individual.
  → “rational ignorance”
Belief Systems in the Mass Public

Relative to political elites, ordinary citizens:

- have little **knowledge** of politics
- lack ideological **consistency** and constraint → “what goes with what”
- have many **“nonattitudes”** but few real opinions

Better-informed citizens are more similar to elites, but perhaps this is just because they know what the “right” answer is.
Surveys are how public opinion is measured, but they also influence what they are measuring.

Surveys are unusual and intrusive.

Logic of conversation: If someone asks you a question, the presumption is that it is one you should have an answer to.

People often construct answers on the spot → “nonattitudes”
Zaller’s **Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) Model:**

1. **Receive** political information (depends on **awareness**)
2. **Accept** the information (depends on **predispositions**)
3. **Sample** from relevant considerations (depends on **salience**)

If partisan elites (who transmit messages through the **media**) are polarized, then so will high-awareness (but not low-awareness) partisans.
The Malleability of Survey Responses

- **Framing**: Structure of political information and choices
- **Agenda-Setting**: Importance of issues
- **Priming**: Relevance/salience of different considerations
- **Elite Cues**: “What do you think of President Obama’s plan...?”
Low-Information Decision-Making

- **Heuristics**: cognitively efficient decision shortcuts
  - Party
  - Incumbency
  - Group
  - Retrospective evaluation

- On-line processing
- Possibility of low-information rationality
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Spring 2013

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