

A Look at the *Beliefs in Government Study*

Max Kaase, *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin fuer Sozialforschung*
Kenneth Newton, *University of Essex*
Elinor Scarbrough, *University of Essex*

The *Beliefs in Government* study is probably the most exhaustive analysis of mass political beliefs and attitudes carried out in the West.¹ It is both intensive and extensive—intensive, because it analyses and reanalyses all the major comparative surveys of mass attitudes and beliefs and adds to these a good deal of country-specific material; extensive, because it covers as many West European nation states as the evidence allows.

Since the region includes 17 countries, all different in some respects but all with a comparable West Europe background and family resemblance, it constitutes “God’s natural laboratory” for political scientists. Some of the surveys go back to the 1960s, even to the 1950s in one or two instances, providing conclusions based upon the longest possible time-series and the broadest possible range of countries in Western Europe. The project involved 56 scholars from all parts of Western Europe and all working with crossnational time-series data within an integrated research framework.

The results of the research are surprising because they challenge widely argued theories of mass opinion and much of the conventional scholarly writing about citizen attitudes towards modern Western government. In the first place, the study underlines the need to guard against the overinterpretation of short-term data and limited comparative studies. Public opinion tends to fluctuate rapidly but superficially in the short run; only by examining long-term trends over a variety of countries is it pos-

sible to discern changes in bedrock attitudes. And, of course, public opinion on some issues varies between countries or moves in different directions. But since many postwar theories of public opinion are based on short-term evidence or on the evidence of a single country, they tend to fail the empirical test.

For example, contrary to much of what has been said in the literature, political participation and voting turnout across West Europe as a whole has not declined. There is little to suggest increasing political alienation or apathy. Voting turnout has remained remarkably stable in the postwar period, and other forms of political participation have, if anything, tended to increase over the years. West European citizens have not withdrawn into political apathy and disillusionment; on the contrary, they participate more.

What has changed, however, is the repertory of acceptable political action, which has broadened since the 1960s and 1970s to include a range of direct or uninstitutionalized forms of action—petitions, demonstrations, citizen initiatives, political strikes. As a result, the boundaries of legal and illegal direct action have tended to blur, a problem that may become more acute in the future. But while direct political action sometimes contains a flavour of expressive attitudes and behaviour, the instrumental mode prevails strongly, contrary to the claims of some theorists of postmodern politics.

Similarly, despite major social, cultural, and economic changes,

West European democracies have maintained a high level of political legitimacy, contrary to predictions about the coming of mass society, a legitimacy crisis, ungovernability and overload, and the subversive effects of new social movements and postmodernity. There are few signs of a declining faith either in the legitimacy of democracy as an abstract principle, or in the way democracy works in particular countries, or in the major institutions of society. Even the claim that support for the established political parties is on the wane is not generally confirmed across Western Europe, although there are certainly examples of this trend in some countries. The evidence shows that the electorate has not become apathetic or hostile; on the other hand, it seems to respond more quickly and directly than formerly. Equally, it seems, democratic procedures, institutions, and actors are also more flexible, adaptable, and responsive to rapid social, economic, and political change than many theories assume.²

It is clear that the decline of religious values and the rise of “new” ones have helped to change the cultural and ideological composition of European democracies in recent decades and in significant ways. Among these should be counted the rise of green politics, feminist politics, support for multicultural life styles, and new social movements. However, whereas there has been an unambiguous decline in religious orientations, and some decline in materialist orientations, the advance of postmaterialist values and postmodern thinking is more mod-

est than commonly believed. Moreover, the persistence of left-right materialist values gives mass politics a continuity that belies many of the claims of “the new politics.”³

“Value shift” over the last two decades in Western Europe cannot be summarized as a monotonic change in any one specific direction. Although younger people tend to be more secular, left materialist, and postmaterialist in their value orientations, and to be more responsive to ecological, feminist, libertarian, and expressive concerns, the general picture is of slowly growing value heterogeneity. These multifaceted changes may make the job of government more difficult in the future, requiring the modification of institutional procedures, but there is no reason to believe that they amount to a direct challenge to the nation state and traditional forms of political power.

Attitudes towards the welfare state and towards the proper role and scope of government reveal a similar sort of picture.⁴ Notwithstanding theories, and some evidence, of a welfare state backlash and tax revolt in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the core components of welfare and public services seem to be deeply ingrained in almost all social groups and in almost all West European countries. There is almost universal (90% or more) support for health, education, housing, and provision for the old, and substantial (around 65%) support for policies aimed at minority rights, gender equality, economic equality, and assistance for industry. The available figures show little change over time, and provide scant evidence of a mood swing in favour of rolling back the state, even in those countries where the welfare state is most developed. Europe approaches the twenty-first century with a solid basis of support for public and welfare services.

On the other hand, the public agenda has not remained constant and unchanging over the decades. West European publics now place less importance on defense than during the Cold War, and they believe in less government regulation of the economy. Equally, environ-

mental matters have increased in importance in the public mind. In these respects the “old” materialist agenda has not been replaced by a “new” postmaterialist or postmodern public agenda. Rather the old and the new have been blended together, with some old elements losing priority, and some new ones gaining it. There has been change rather than transformation, and the change has not provoked crisis or instability; rather it has been incorporated in a slow and piecemeal manner by the old elites and institutions.

Public opinion is often said to be unstable, poorly informed, incoherent, irrational, and egoistic. The evidence in *Beliefs in Government* suggests, if anything, that at the aggregate level it tends towards stability, internal coherence and consistency, rational responses to external events, and sociotropic orientations. The field of international relations, for example, is more remote, abstract, changeable, and complex than domestic politics. One might expect, therefore, public opinion about international affairs to be ignorant, unstable, and superficial. Yet the survey data suggest that those who do not know about the subject matter of a particular question tend to exclude themselves by giving “Don’t know” or “No response” answers. Those who do respond usually demonstrate a general knowledge, and although they are often unable to supply factual details, they cannot be accused easily of “doorstep opinions” or “non-opinions.” For example, on the subject of the European Union (EU), most citizens are short on particular facts about the powers and functions of the European Parliament or the Commission, but most are well aware of the general problem of the “democratic deficit” of the EU.

Similarly large-scale and long-term shifts in public opinion about international affairs are a response to events in the real world: support for NATO dropped steeply after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, then rose again as a result of the Gulf War; enthusiasm for the EU declined sharply at the time of Maastricht and the failure of the

European Monetary System; lack of trust for Britain among other EU nations rose in the 1980s when Thatcher was embellishing Britain’s role as “the awkward partner.” Public opinion on both domestic and international politics is not to be taken lightly.

Support for the EU, NATO, and UN is relatively high across West Europe, although there are differences between nations. Support for the EU has risen slowly, if unsteadily, since the early 1970s and no longer seems to constitute the “permissive consensus” claimed for it 26 years ago. There is substantial public weight behind international integration and cooperation across West Europe as a whole, and it appears to be growing.

Some political scientists have argued that, at the mass level, weak nationalism is a prerequisite of internationalism; others have suggested that, on the contrary, it is a secure national identity that allows people to venture out into international cooperation. For one theory, nationalism is a springboard for internationalism; for the other, it is a prime obstacle. The evidence confirms neither thesis. There is no simple or direct relationship between measures of support for European integration or for the EU, and measures of nationalism or national pride. Strong and weak nationalism are associated with EU support, depending on different circumstances in different countries. Nationalism and Europeanism are not necessarily incompatible; in some countries they are natural allies; in others they do not mix at all.

The evidence suggests a continuing cultural diversity within Europe combined with a growing political convergence. People continue to identify with localities, regions, and nations, and they continue to see those from other localities, regions, and nations as different. At the same time, they seem to be increasingly able and willing to cooperate with others in Western Europe. What matters is not a common European culture or identity, but a growing sense of an ability to do business with others who are different. In this sense, at-

tempts to build a more homogeneous European citizenship may be less important than trust in others and acceptance of a set of rules for handling cultural diversity.⁵

Overall, the evidence from the *Beliefs in Government* study is of political stability, continuity, and adaption, rather than fundamental or wholesale transformation, even though there *has* been major and rapid social and economic change in the same period. This may help to explain why the much discussed matter of issue-voting in the 1970s and 1980s did not disrupt many of the traditional voting patterns of West European countries. It may also help to explain why the single-issue, new social movements of the same decades have not had the large impact on traditional parties and party systems that some predicted. Policy agendas have shifted but the moulds of established politics have not cracked and broken.

A general conclusion from this project is that political scientists might concentrate less exclusively on what are undoubtedly enormous pressures for change in modern society, and look also at the enormous pressures for inertia, continuity, and stability. The paradox is that theories of change may have concentrated too much on change and too little on obstacles or resistance to change.⁶

It is possible that the collapse of the Soviet bloc also marks the end of an era for Western democracies, and that without an external enemy the latter may come under increasing internal criticism and political

pressure. The lessons of *Beliefs in Government* research is that democracies can withstand considerable internal and external pressure by virtue of their capacity to adapt in a slow and piecemeal manner. Our speculation is that after a period of some volatility and disorientation, liberal democracies will measure themselves against their fresh challenges—social, religious, cultural, economic, and ideological, for example—and survive by adapting.

Notes

1. The project was funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and by 11 of the research councils that are members of the ESF—namely, those of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, The Federal Republic of Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

2. On the topics of political participation, voting turnout, party identification and membership, membership of intermediary organizations, trust in institutions, support for democratic values and practices, and trust in politicians see Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs, eds., 1995, *Citizens and the State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3. These changes are documented and analysed in Jan W. Van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough, eds., 1995, *The Impact of Values*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. The volume focuses primarily on three major value orientations and their impact on mass politics: religious-secular; left-right materialism; and materialism-postmaterialism. It also considers the development and political impact of green politics, feminism, and post-modern values.

4. Mass attitudes about the welfare state, public services, and the role of the state are

covered in Ole Borre and Elinor Scarbrough, eds., 1995, *The Scope of Government*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5. On this and other aspects of West European public opinion about organizations of internationalized governance, see Oskar Niedermayer and Richard Sinnott, eds., 1995, *Public Opinion and Internationalized Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6. The final volume of the series, *Beliefs in Government* (Max Kaase and Kenneth Newton, 1995, Oxford: Oxford University Press), pulls together the rich and detailed findings of the other four volumes and sets them in a broad context of government and politics in Western democracies.

About the Authors

Max Kaase is a professor of political science. He is on permanent leave from the University of Mannheim and works as a research professor at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin fuer Sozialforschung. His areas of interest include comparative politics, political sociology, and mass communication. His most recent publication, with Andrew Kohut, is *Estranged Friends: The Transatlantic Consequences of Societal Change* (Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1996).

Kenneth Newton is a professor of government at the University of Essex and executive director of the European Consortium for Political Research. In recent years he has coauthored *Does Politics Matter?* and *Political Data Handbook*. He was codirector of the ESF Beliefs in Government research program and coauthor of its fifth volume, *Beliefs in Government*.

Elinor Scarbrough is a member of the department of government at the University of Essex and was research coordinator of the ESF Beliefs in Government research program. She is the author of *Political Ideology and Voting* and other works on political values and political cleavages. She is coeditor of two of the Beliefs in Government series—*The Scope of Government* and *The Impact of Values*.