

PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL OPINIONATION

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American citizens differ from one another in terms of the number of opinions they have toward government policies. This article proposes and tests a psychological model of the determinants of political opinionation that accounts for this variation across citizens. The theory posits four causal factors that are thought to interact with one another in determining an individual's level of opinionation: objective political competence, subjective political competence, perceptions of politicians' interest in citizens' opinions on policy issues, and general cognitive sophistication. Analyses of data from all of the American National Election Studies conducted in presidential election years between 1956 and 1984 provided support for some aspects of the theory and challenged others. Our analyses also identified relations of age, gender, and race to political opinionation and provided explanations for these relations.

After nearly 40 years of research on attitudes, social psychologists have learned a great deal about how attitudes can be measured, how they are structured, and how they change (McGuire, 1985). However, we currently know relatively little about the conditions under which individuals are especially likely to form an attitude toward an object and those under which they are especially unlikely to do so. Furthermore, little is currently known about what dispositional characteristics of individuals facilitate or impede attitude formation. In this article, we explore the impact of various situational and dispositional factors on individuals' tendencies to form attitudes.

Any theory of the determinants of attitude formation is likely to be domain-specific, and our investigation takes place within the context of an especially consequential domain: American politics. In particular, we explore individuals' tendencies to form attitudes toward the many government policies that are the subject of popular debate at any point in history. As a result, our work has important implications

both for a general understanding of attitude formation and for the development of political theory. This is so because political theorists accord substantial importance to Americans' attitudes toward government policies. According to many such theorists, democratic governments maintain popular support because citizens elect government representatives who agree with their policy preferences, implement their preferred policies, and forgo policies they oppose (Dahl, 1956; Pennock, 1979). Because citizens' voting decisions cannot reflect policy preferences if they have no policy preferences in the first place, opinionation on policy issues is a necessary prerequisite for this view of democracy. Furthermore, public opinion poll reports of public attitudes provide elected representatives with information about their constituents' policy preferences, so levels of opinionation presumably reflect the strength with which such information constrains representatives' actions. Therefore, gauging the prevalence and identifying the determinants of political opinionation on policy issues will contribute importantly to an understanding of the functioning of contemporary democratic governments.

A growing literature documents that certain citizens are more likely than others to have opinions on political issues addressing government policy. The propensity to hold political opinions is a characteristic of individuals that appears to be highly stable over time (Rapoport, 1982) and across familial generations (Rapoport, 1985) and is correlated with many demographic variables. However, no general model of the psychological origins of opinionation has yet been formulated and tested. In this article, we propose and evaluate such a model.

THE CAUSES OF POLITICAL OPINIONATION

Our model proposes that political opinionation is a function of four variables: objective political competence, subjective political competence, perceptions of politicians' interest in citizens' opinions on policy issues, and general cognitive sophistication. *Objective political competence* is defined as the amount of knowledge an individual has stored in memory about political history and about current political events. This knowledge is presumably accumulated as a result of exposure to political information through the news media, though this exposure must be accompanied by some minimal level of interest in politics. Political knowledge is also accumulated through direct participation in political events, such as election campaigns. We assume that the more knowledgeable an individual is about politics, the more likely he or she is

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to develop opinions on political issues. Furthermore, exposure to political information and behavioral participation in politics may lead to greater exposure to others' political opinions and may therefore facilitate the formation of political opinions over and above their effects on the amount of knowledge one has stored in memory.

Subjective political competence is defined as an individual's perception of his or her abilities to understand political events. It is probably a function in part of the individual's objective political competence, because people who are more knowledgeable about and involved in politics are likely to recognize their relative superiority in this regard. Within levels of objective political competence, however, individuals may vary in terms of the confidence they attach to their analyses of politics. For example, as a result of observing different levels of political participation by parents, males may gain higher subjective competence than females. Thus, a person's socialization experiences may instill either a high or low level of subjective political competence. Subjective political competence may also be determined partly by the objective political competence of others with whom one regularly interacts. For example, a person might have less confidence in her political opinions if her friends are congressional lobbyists than if her friends are farmers. Controlling for objective political competence, we would expect people with higher levels of subjective political competence to evidence greater political opinionation.

Citizens differ from one another in terms of their perceptions of politicians' interest in citizens' opinions on policy issues (what we call *perceived demand*). Some people feel that politicians are keenly interested in what citizens want and are responsive to public opinion on policy questions. Others feel that politicians are basically uninterested in public opinion and that government policy is made regardless of the public's wishes. Citizens who believe that government is interested in and responsive to their opinions may be more likely to form such opinions because they are more likely to believe that the effort they spend in forming opinions will be worthwhile.¹

Finally, we expect political opinionation to be related to individuals' *cognitive sophistication*. To responsibly form an opinion on a policy issue, a citizen must attend to volumes of relevant information, store that information in memory, and integrate it into a summary judgment. Cognitive sophistication, which we define as the ability to perform abstract reasoning tasks and to manipulate large amounts of information, greatly facilitates these tasks. Furthermore, many political debates are carried on in relatively sophisticated language and involve both abstract concepts and detailed political information. It is presumably easier for citizens with more cognitive sophistication to understand what

politicians say about any particular issue; therefore they may find it easier to form political opinions and be more likely to do so.

In addition to these main effects of objective political competence, subjective political competence, perceptions of politicians' interests in citizens' opinions, and cognitive sophistication, we anticipate some interactions among these variables in determining opinionation. In particular, we expect that people at high levels of objective political competence will find it so easy to form political opinions that low subjective competence, perceptions of low government interest, or low cognitive sophistication will not reduce opinionation. Therefore, at high levels of objective political competence, the effects of the other three variables may be substantially reduced or perhaps even eliminated. In addition, we expect that high cognitive sophistication permits an individual to form political opinions quite easily, regardless of how knowledgeable he or she is about politics, how subjectively competent he or she feels, and what his or her perceptions of politicians are. So at high levels of cognitive sophistication, the effects of objective competence may be reduced or eliminated.

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF POLITICAL OPINIONATION

The existing literature on the correlates of political opinionation offers some support for these speculations. People who report that they are interested in, knowledgeable about, or exposed regularly to information about politics evidence higher levels of political opinionation (Faulkenberry & Mason, 1978; Ferber, 1956; Francis & Busch, 1975; Judd, Krosnick, & Milburn, 1981; Neuman, 1986; Rapoport, 1981, 1982; Reese & Miller, 1981; Stillman, Guthrie, & Becker, 1960). Better-educated citizens, who presumably are more cognitively sophisticated, also evidence higher levels of opinionation (Almond, 1950; Bishop, Oldendick, & Tuchfarber, 1980; Converse, 1976; Faulkenberry & Mason, 1978; Francis & Busch, 1975; Gergen & Back, 1965; Glenn, 1966; Judd, Krosnick, & Milburn, 1981; Neuman, 1986; Reese & Miller, 1981; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Sigelman, 1981; Smith, 1981; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974; see also Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), even controlling for knowledge about and involvement in politics (Francis & Busch, 1975).

Empirical studies have also shown that political opinionation is related to gender. Males tend to have more political opinions than do females (Almond, 1950; Campbell & Cooper, 1956; Cantril & Roll, 1971; Francis & Busch, 1975; Glenn, 1966; Jennings & Farah, 1981; Klein, 1984; Neuman, 1986; Rapoport, 1981, 1982; Shapiro & Mahajan,

1986; Smith, 1984; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974) partly, but not completely, because men are more politically knowledgeable than women (Francis & Busch, 1975; Glenn, 1966; Rapoport, 1981, 1982). Rapoport (1981, 1982) also suggested that men may be more opinionated than women because of differences in subjective political competence. In particular, women may have been socialized to believe they are less able to understand politics than men are and therefore less likely to form political opinions. In support of this explanation, he showed that the gender gap is smaller at high levels of objective political competence and in young birth cohorts, a finding he interpreted as showing the effects of the women's movement. Also consistent with this view is Shapiro and Mahajan's (1986) evidence that gender differences in opinionation became progressively smaller between 1964 and 1983. However, because Rapoport did not measure subjective political competence directly, these findings must be considered inconclusive.

Political opinionation has been shown to be greater among younger birth cohorts (Francis & Busch, 1975; Gergen & Back, 1965; Glenn, 1966; Rapoport, 1982; Reese & Miller, 1981; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974; see also Herzog & Rodgers, 1988) because of differences in objective political competence and cognitive sophistication (Francis & Busch, 1975; Gergen & Back, 1965; Glenn, 1966). Because these analyses were conducted with cross-sectional data, the observed differences between birth cohorts could result from either cohort-specific socialization experiences or the effects of aging. It could therefore be that these relations are due to changing levels of objective political competence and cognitive sophistication either across birth cohorts or across the life cycle.

In one study, whites were found to evidence higher levels of opinionation than did nonwhites (Francis & Busch, 1975). This association was reduced but not eliminated by controlling for education and political involvement, which suggests that nonwhites are less opinionated partly because they are less educated and less involved in politics. Extending Rapoport's (1981, 1982) reasoning about gender to the case of race, nonwhites may also be less opinionated than whites because the former have lower subjective political competence. Thus, there may be an interaction between race and objective political competence analogous to Rapoport's gender-by-objective political competence interaction. That is, the difference between whites and nonwhites may be large among those low in objective political competence and small among those high in objective political competence.

Although this literature offers support for various hypotheses in our theory of the psychological determinants of political opinionation, no study has evaluated all of the hypotheses simultaneously, and no

previous study has explored interactions among the determinants we propose. In this article, we test our theory and Rapoport's hypotheses using data from national surveys conducted between 1956 and 1984. In each of these surveys, respondents were asked to report their opinions on a wide range of policy issues. We conducted analyses predicting opinionation using measures of objective political competence, subjective political competence, perceptions of politicians' interests in citizens' opinions, cognitive sophistication, race, gender, age, and a series of interaction terms. Also, to validate our assumption that opinionation is tied to relatively stable aspects of individuals, we assessed the stability of political opinionation over the course of a single presidential campaign.

METHOD

DATA SETS

Immediately before and after each U.S. presidential election since 1956, the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies has interviewed representative national samples of American adults. In these surveys, called the National Election Studies (NES), respondents were asked a variety of questions about their political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and we used these data to test the theory of opinionation described above. To assess the stability of opinionation, we used the 1980 National Election Panel Study, in which a representative national sample of adults was interviewed three times during the 1980 presidential election campaign (January/February, June, and September).

MEASURES

Political Opinionation. During the NES interviews, respondents were asked questions tapping their opinions on a variety of government policy issues.² Not all respondents in a given survey were asked all of the policy questions included in that survey's questionnaire because of interview break-offs, interviewer errors, and other such factors. Therefore, to assess each respondent's level of opinionation, the total number of opinions he or she expressed was divided by the total number of opinion questions he or she was asked. Larger scores on this index, which ranged from 0 to 1, indicated higher levels of opinionation. The number of policy questions asked varied considerably from year to year, from a low of 9 in 1968 to a high of 30 in 1976 (see the ninth row of Table 1).³

TABLE 1
Distributions of Opinionation Scores

% POLICY ATTITUDE QUESTIONS ANSWERED	1956		1960		1964		1968		1972		1976		1980		1984	
	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used	N	No. of Attitude Items used
90-100	52.8	66.2	39.1	63.5	31.9	66.2	31.9	63.5	84.4	64.4	48.0	56.0	18.3	52.8	11.9	18.3
80-89	18.3	11.9	26.2	13.2	26.2	11.9	26.2	13.2	9.1	20.0	27.7	14.2	10.7	18.3	11.9	14.2
70-79	10.7	12.7	10.0	9.6	10.0	9.6	10.0	4.3	7.3	20.0	7.7	7.7	4.0	10.7	9.6	7.7
60-69	4.0	3.7	11.9	5.6	11.9	3.7	11.9	1.5	4.2	7.6	7.6	7.8	3.7	4.0	3.7	7.8
50-59	5.3	0.9	4.2	2.4	4.2	0.9	4.2	0.4	2.0	3.3	5.4	5.4	5.3	5.3	3.3	5.4
0-49	8.9	4.6	8.6	5.5	8.6	4.6	8.6	0.3	2.1	4.5	8.8	8.8	8.9	8.9	4.5	8.8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	1762	1954	1571	1557	1571	1557	1557	2705	1909	1614	2257	1762	1762	1954	1571	1557
	16	12	14	9	14	12	9	13	30	20	13	13	16	12	9	13
Mean opinionation score	82.7	87.2	78.9	83.4	78.9	87.2	83.4	95.0	88.2	84.2	83.6	82.7	82.7	87.2	78.9	83.4

Objective Political Competence. Given our definition of objective competence, the most desirable measure of objective political competence would be a measure of respondents' factual knowledge regarding politics. The NES questionnaires sometimes included measures of political knowledge, but they did not appear in all surveys and were relatively few in the surveys in which they did appear. However, the NES surveys all included questions measuring the antecedents of political knowledge. Therefore, to construct a measure of objective political competence given the available data, we computed and averaged four subscores for each respondent. The subscores indicated each respondent's level of objective political knowledge, self-reported interest in politics, exposure to political information through the media or conversations, and participation in political activities. The correlations among these subscores were generally strongly positive, so we interpreted larger averages of these subscores as indicating higher objective political competence. The individual subscores and their average ranged from 1 to 5, with larger numbers indicating higher levels of objective political competence.

Subjective Political Competence. NES respondents were asked only one question measuring subjective political competence; it inquired whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." Occasionally, surveys included slightly different versions of this question; for example, in 1968, the following question was also asked: "Would you say that politics and government are so complicated that people like you can't really understand what's going on, or that you can understand what's going on pretty well?" In years when two questions were asked, we averaged responses to the two items. In all years, the subjective competence score ranged from 1 to 5, with larger numbers indicating higher levels of subjective competence.

Perceived System Demand for Opinions. Two items in the NES measured respondents' perceptions of the degree to which government responds to public opinion. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with two statements: "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think" and "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." We averaged scores on these two items to produce a single score for each respondent on perceived system demand, which ranged from 1 to 5, with larger numbers indicating higher levels.

Cognitive Sophistication. The NES surveys have not included any direct measures of intelligence or cognitive sophistication. However, cognitive functioning is probably related to the level of education an

individual has attained. Consequently, we treated each respondent's number of years of formal education as a measure of cognitive sophistication. This variable ranged from 0 to 22, with 22 representing individuals with 22 or more years of education.

Additional Measures. All NES respondents were asked when they were born, and responses were recoded into age measured in years. Preliminary analyses indicated that the relation between age and opinionation was monotonic and nearly linear, so age was used in the analyses reported below in its raw form. We also made use of interviewers' observations of respondents' gender and race. Gender was coded 1 for males and 2 for females, and race was coded 1 for whites and 2 for nonwhites.

ANALYSIS STRATEGY

Stability Assessment. To validate our measure of political opinionation, we examined the stability of opinionation across the 1980 presidential election campaign. We expected that opinionation would be a stable attribute of individuals; if this turned out not to be true, it would call into question the validity of that expectation and/or the validity of our measure.

Test-Retest correlations are attenuated both by instability of the construct and by random measurement error. Therefore, to assess the stability of opinionation, over-time correlations must be decomposed into components due to instability of the construct and unreliability of the measure. To do so, we employed Wiley and Wiley's (1970) structural equation model, the parameters of which we estimated using LISREL IV (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1978).

Model Testing. To test our model of the origins of political opinionation, we conducted a series of ordinary least-squares multiple regressions predicting respondents' opinionation scores.⁴ These regressions were performed after the dependent variable was subjected to an arcsin transformation (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). We analyzed each year's data separately, and we conducted two sets of stepwise regressions. In the first set, we entered the following independent variables in each regression equation: *Stage 1:* gender, age, race; *Stage 2:* education; *Stage 3:* objective political competence; *Stage 4:* subjective political competence, system demand for opinionation; *Stage 5:* Gender \times Age, Gender \times Objective Competence, Education \times Objective Competence, Subjective Competence \times Objective Competence, Demand \times Objective Competence, Age \times Objective Competence, Race \times Objective Competence.

The order of entry of the independent variables was determined by the following theoretical considerations. Because demographic variables are purely exogenous, we entered them first. We entered educational attainment after the other three demographic variables to examine whether educational attainment mediates the effects of gender, age, and race. Objective political competence was entered next to examine whether it mediates the effect of education. The perceptual variables were entered subsequently to examine whether they mediate the effects of education and objective political competence.

In the first set of regressions, objective political competence was treated as a single variable. We conducted a second set of regressions that explored the independent impact of each of its components: political knowledge, media exposure, interest in politics, and political participation. To do so, we entered the following independent variables in two stages: *Stage 1*: gender, age, race, education, political knowledge, media exposure, interest in politics, political participation, subjective political competence, system demand for opinionation; *Stage 2*: media exposure \times interest in politics. The first stage determined which of the four components of objective political expertise made independent contributions to opinionation levels. The second stage tested the hypothesis that exposure to political information increases opinionation only if that exposure is accompanied by a high degree of political interest. That is, this equation tested whether opinionation results from a relatively passive process of information absorption or from an active interest-drive process.

We conducted these regressions in a stepwise fashion to assess which variables mediate the effects of which others, and we describe the mediation findings below. However, when we present the regression coefficients for the complete main effects model in the text and tables below, those coefficients are derived only from the final models, with all terms entered in the equation simultaneously. Similarly, the coefficients reported for the interactions are based on the equations that included all main effects and interaction terms simultaneously.

RESULTS

DISTRIBUTION OF OPINIONATION

Table 1 displays the distributions and means of the opinionation index for each year. These figures suggest that within the spectrum of issues addressed in the NES, levels of opinionation in the American public have been quite high. About half of the nation offered opinions on 90% or more of the policy issues they were asked about, and the bulk

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of the remaining individuals offered opinions in response to 70% or more of the items that they were asked.

THE STABILITY OF OPINIONATION

Because we believe the determinants of opinionation are generally stable dispositions or traits of individuals, we expected that respondents' levels of opinionation would be relatively stable over the course of a presidential election campaign. The estimates of stability produced by the Wiley and Wiley (1970) model are consistent with that expectation. Standardized stability coefficients were .85 from Wave 1 to Wave 2 and .97 from Wave 2 to Wave 3. Thus, the overall stability of opinionation across the 9-month period was .83. This attests to the validity of the view that opinionation is a stable attribute of individuals.

The Wiley and Wiley (1970) model also generates estimates of the reliability of the opinionation measure. These estimates were .61 for Wave 1, .63 for Wave 2, and .68 for Wave 3. These figures are high enough to justify using the measure for testing hypotheses about the determinants of opinionation. However, they suggest that the standardized coefficient estimates generated by the multiple regressions described below are substantially attenuated because of random measurement error. Therefore, the regression coefficient estimates probably substantially underestimate the independent variables' effects.

PREDICTING OPINIONATION

Race, Age, and Gender. The regression coefficient estimates for the Stage 1 equation were perfectly consistent across the 8 years. Men were more opinionated than women; young people were more opinionated than older people; and whites were more opinionated than nonwhites. Furthermore, the strength of the relations between opinionation and gender, age, and race did not vary systematically across the period from 1956 to 1984.

Cognitive Sophistication. The claim that cognitive sophistication enhances opinionation received support from the Stage 2 regression equation parameter estimates. Years of education had a consistently positive effect on opinionation. Adding education to the equation had no effect on the coefficient for gender but did substantially reduce the coefficients for race and age. This suggests that older people and nonwhites are less opinionated than younger people and whites partly because the former individuals are less educated.

Objective Political Competence. We added objective political competence to the equation at Stage 3 to examine whether it mediates the effect of educational attainment on opinionation. As expected, objective political competence had a positive impact on opinionation in all years. Also, adding objective political competence to the equation substantially reduced the effect of education on opinionation, by about 50% in most cases. However, the effect of education remained moderate and statistically significant in all eight equations. This suggests that better-educated citizens are more opinionated partly because they are better equipped with the cognitive skills necessary for forming political opinions. Adding objective political competence to the equation had essentially no effect on the coefficients for age and race, which suggests that their effects are not mediated by objective political competence. Consistent with past research, the gender effect was slightly reduced by the addition of objective political competence, which suggests that this variable partly mediates the gender gap.

Subjective Competence and Perceived Demand. As would be expected, bivariate correlations between political opinionation and the two attitudinal predictors (subjective political competence and perceived demand) were consistently positive. However, the parameter estimates from the Stage 4 regressions were not sizable. Thirteen of the 16 coefficients for these two variables were positive, as anticipated, but few were statistically significant. For subjective competence, β s ranged from $-.03$ to $.12$ and averaged $.04$; and for perceived demand, β s ranged from $.00$ to $.13$ and averaged $.05$. This suggests that, contrary to our expectations, subjective political competence and perceived system demand do not increase political opinionation.

Not surprisingly, the addition of subjective political competence and perceived demand to the regression equations had essentially no effect on the other coefficient estimates. This finding contradicts Rapoport's (1981, 1982) claim that men are more opinionated than women because they are higher in subjective political competence. This finding also discredits our extension of Rapoport's argument to race, whereby we suggested that nonwhites might be less opinionated than whites because the former are lower in subjective political competence.

The complete set of Stage 4 regression coefficients are shown in Table 2. These coefficients generally conform to expectations. Gender and age have consistently negative effects, and race has a moderately consistent negative effect. Education and objective political competence have consistently positive effects. However, subjective competence and perceived demand only rarely had the expected positive effects.

Explaining the Gender Gap. Rapoport's (1981, 1982) evidence in support of his hypothesis took the form of interactions between gender

TABLE 2
Standardized Regression Coefficient Estimates for Model Including Only Main Effects

	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984
Gender	-.24*	-.18*	-.16*	-.15*	-.04*	-.10*	-.12*	-.11*
Age	-.02	-.05*	-.04†	-.01	-.16*	-.16*	-.12*	-.15*
Race	-.07*	-.04†	.02	.01	.00	-.03†	-.11*	-.11*
Education	.12*	.13*	.15*	.09*	.07*	.17*	.26*	.24*
Objective competence	.24*	.26*	.37*	.32*	.21*	.41*	.36*	.22*
Subjective competence	.06*	.04†	.11*	.12*	-.05*	-.03†	.01	.02
Demand for opinionation	.13*	.09*	.00	.01	.03†	.01	.01	.10*
N	1719	1883	1544	1539	2664	1867	1395	2193
R ²	.28	.22	.30	.22	.12	.34	.33	.26

* $p < .05$. † $p < .12$.

and age and between gender and objective political competence. He found the effect of gender on political opinionation to be large among older birth cohorts and among individuals low in objective political competence. The effect essentially disappeared among young birth cohorts and among people high in objective political competence. Rapoport argued that because men and women probably did not differ in terms of subjective political competence among young birth cohorts and among people high in objective political competence, this pattern of results is consistent with his claim that subjective political competence mediates the effect of gender on political opinionation. Controlling for subjective political competence using a direct measure of that variable is a more appropriate way to test Rapoport's hypothesis, and the above results discredit it.

Interestingly, the interactions he identified between gender and birth cohort and between gender and objective political competence are significant in the present data (see rows 8 and 9 of Table 3). However, the pattern of coefficients we obtained after controlling for the additional variables in our model is somewhat different from his. We found that, controlling for other factors, young women are *more* opinionated than young men. This difference diminishes as age increases, and at about age 55, there is no difference between men and women. It is only at about age 70 (almost two SDs above the average age) that men are more opinionated than women.

Rapoport (1981, 1982) identified this sex-by-age interaction using data collected during the 1970s and attributed it to differences in the sex role socialization experiences of younger and older birth cohorts. Among individuals socialized during the early part of the century, he claimed, men were socialized to be more confident than women in their abilities to form political opinions. Rapoport argued that as a result of the women's movement, young women in the 1970s were socialized to be just as confident as men in this regard. This reasoning would suggest that the gender-by-age interaction should be stronger in the 1970s and 1980s than in the 1950s. However, this is not noticeably the case; in fact, the interaction is just as strong in the 1956 equation as it is in the 1984 equation. This result further calls into question Rapoport's claim that the observed gender difference among older individuals is a result of generation-linked socialization experiences. The consistency of the interaction across the 30-year period studied here suggests that it reflects an effect of aging rather than cohort or period effects.

The second interaction Rapoport (1981, 1982) examined was between gender and objective political competence. Our regression coef-

TABLE 3
Standardized Regression Coefficient Estimates for Model with Gender Interactions and Objective Competence Interactions

	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984
Gender	.08	.04	.01	.06	.14†	.16†	-.10†	.22*
Age	.02	-.14	-.13	.41*	.10	.18*	-.08	.14†
Race	-.18†	.09	-.23*	-.10	-.03	-.03	-.12*	.10
Education	-.11	.03	-.04	-.06	-.09	-.16*	.26*	-.11
Objective competence	.12	.07	.73*	.25	-.12	.71*	.89*	.11
Subjective competence	-.15	.20†	.18	-.12	.03	.22*	-.01	.04
Demand for opinionation	-.24*	-.15	-.11	.00	-.13*	-.08	.01	.01
Gender × Age	-.17*	-.19*	-.10	-.31*	-.12	-.32*	-.05	-.20*
Gender × Objective Competence	.28*	.47*	.12	.02	.16†	.12	.15*	.32*
Education × Objective Competence	-.22*	-.09	-.13	-.17	-.01	-.40*	-.74*	-.45*
Subjective Competence × Objective Competence	-.29*	.20	.10	-.31*	.03	.26*	.02	.01
Demand × Objective Competence	-.41*	-.28*	-.13	-.03	-.23*	-.12	-.10*	-.10
Age × Objective Competence	-.12	-.06	-.21*	.28*	.21*	.09	-.06	.15†
Race × Objective Competence	-.18	.18	-.31*	-.14	-.04	.02	.03	.29*
N	1719	1883	1544	1540	2664	1867	1395	2193
R ²	.30	.23	.31	.24	.13	.37	.37	.29

* $p < .05$, † $p < .12$.

ficient estimates indicate that the expected gender gap (i.e., men more opinionated than women) is present only at low levels of objective political competence. At higher levels of objective competence, women are much more opinionated than men. Rapoport's interpretation of this interaction also focused on subjective political competence. According to his argument, high objective political competence encourages women to form political opinions despite the socializing experiences that discourage opinionation. This reasoning predicts that controlling for subjective political competence and for the interaction between subjective political competence and objective political competence should eliminate the gender-by-objective political competence interaction. Because this latter interaction is often sizable and significant in row 9 of Table 3, our analyses do not support Rapoport's subjective political competence explanation.

The Buffering Effect of Objective Political Competence. The interactions between objective political competence and education, subjective political competence, demand, and age were included to examine whether the latter four variables might have reduced effects on opinionation among individuals high in objective political competence. This expectation was confirmed in the cases of education and perceived demand for opinionation. All 16 of these interactions in Table 3 are negative, and 8 of them are statistically significant. The coefficient estimates for the interactions between objective political competence and age and between objective political competence and subjective political competence do not evidence much consistency over the 8 years and therefore do not seem to merit interpretation.

The results in Table 3 indicate that, at low levels of objective competence, education has a positive effect on opinionation. As objective competence increases, the effect of education decreases: it is near zero for average levels of objective competence, and it is negative at high levels of competence. This suggests that cognitive ability leads politically informed people to recognize the many complex and difficult trade-offs inherent in any political issue and therefore makes them reluctant to form what they might view as overly simplistic policy preferences.

The results in Table 3 show a similar interaction between objective competence and demand. At low levels of competence, the effect of demand is essentially zero and becomes negative with increasing competence. This interaction is more difficult to interpret, and we suspect that it may reflect the spurious effect of some other variable that causes both low perceived demand and high opinionation at high levels of objective competence.

DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL OPINIONATION

Race and Subjective Political Competence. The race-by-objective political competence interaction, shown in the 14th row of Table 3, was included to test an extension of Rapoport's reasoning. We speculated that whites might be more opinionated than nonwhites because of differences in subjective political competence. The evidence reported above—that controlling for subjective political competence does not reduce the race main effect—discounts the validity of this speculation. The evidence in Table 3 does as well; the interaction between race and objective political competence is significant in only 2 of the 8 years, and the coefficients are opposite in direction in those 2 years. It therefore seems that these two variables do not interact and that differences between whites and nonwhites cannot be explained by differences in subjective political competence.

Variance Explained. The proportions of variance in opinionation that are explained by the full regression equation are relatively large by social science standards (see the bottom row of Table 3). They range from .13 to .37 and average .28. Assuming that there is some amount of random measurement error in the dependent and independent variables, the proportion of true variance explained by the model is likely to be quite a bit higher. After disattenuation based on the Wiley and Wiley (1970) estimate of .64 described above, the R^2 's average was .45.

Components of Objective Political Competence. We conducted two final sets of regressions to assess the effects of the four components of objective political competence. The first-stage regressions, shown in Table 4, revealed consistent effects of knowledge, exposure, and interest. High levels of opinionation were associated with high levels of knowledge, exposure, and interest. However, these regressions indicated that behavioral participation in politics had only a weak positive effect on opinionation. We suspect that this effect may be weak because participation probably occurs only when an individual is highly opinionated on political issues.

The second-stage regressions (not shown) revealed a very robust interaction between media exposure and political interest. This interaction was positive in all years, and it was sizable and statistically significant or marginally so in 6 of them. Among people who were very interested in politics, exposure to political information increased opinionation, as would be expected. But among people who were uninterested in politics, frequent exposure to political information actually decreased opinionation. This may reflect a reactance-like process whereby these individuals actively distance themselves from what they might consider to be a constant, perhaps even annoying flow of uninteresting information.

DISCUSSION

THE BASIC MODEL

These results generally support our model of the psychological origins of political opinionation. Consistent with our expectations, opinionation was positively associated with objective political competence, cognitive sophistication (as measured by educational attainment), and perceived demand for opinionation by the political system. Objective political competence also appeared to exert a buffering effect on cognitive sophistication and perceived demand: among individuals high in objective political competence, the impact of cognitive sophistication and perceived demand on opinionation were significantly reduced. The effect of educational attainment on political opinionation appeared to be mediated partly by objective political competence. Contrary to our expectations, subjective political competence was found to have no effect on political opinionation.

When the components of objective political competence were considered separately, political knowledge, media exposure, and interest in politics all appeared to increase opinionation. Furthermore, heavy media exposure appeared to increase opinionation among individuals who were highly interested in politics and decrease opinionation among those who were not interested in politics. However, contrary to our expectations, we found that behavioral participation in politics increased opinionation only weakly.

One might be tempted to conclude that subjective political competence does not play an important role in directing the formation of political attitudes. However, our data are consistent with the view that subjective competence is indeed an important cause of objective political competence. It may be that individuals who feel capable of understanding politics are more likely to invest the effort necessary to achieve high levels of political knowledge, media exposure, interest, and participation. Consequently, subjective political competence may determine opinionation, but its effect may be mediated by objective political competence.

AGE AND RACE

Our analyses provided partial explanations for the associations between opinionation and age and race. Younger people and whites were more opinionated than older individuals and nonwhites partly because the former two groups were better educated and higher in objective political

TABLE 4
Standardized Regression Coefficient Estimates for Model Including Main Effects for Components of Objective Political Competence

	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984
Gender	-.24*	-.17*	-.17*	-.14*	-.03	-.11*	-.12*	-.09*
Age	-.02	-.06*	-.04*	-.06*	-.21*	-.17*	-.12*	-.19*
Race	-.07*	-.03	.05*	.00	.01	-.03	-.12*	-.12*
Education	.13*	.10*	.13*	.06*	.02	.15*	.27*	.20*
Media exposure	.10*	.05*	.12*	.09*	.08*	.24*	.11*	.15*
Political interest	.16*	.22*	.23*	.26*	.06*	.08*	.17*	.04*
Political participation	.03	.03	.07*	.03	.02	.07*	.10*	.05*
Political knowledge	NA ^a	.11*	.12*	.12*	.19*	.14*	.07*	.12*
Subjective competence	.06*	.03	.07*	.06*	-.04	-.03	.01	.01
Demand for opinionation	.13*	.08*	.01	.01	.03	.00	-.01	.08*
N	1718	1765	1427	1337	1093	1862	1395	1891
R ²	.28	.26	.34	.26	.15	.35	.33	.28

^aNo measures of political knowledge were included in the 1956 survey.
* $p < .05$. † $p < .12$.

competence. Because controlling for subjective political competence did not reduce the apparent effects of age and race, these effects seem not to be mediated by that variable.

Our finding that age did not exert an independent effect on opinionation is consistent with the findings of previous studies of political involvement. For example, Jennings and Markus (1988) found that whereas active forms of political involvement (such as attending political meetings) do decrease with age, passive forms of involvement (such as following political news closely) do not decline between about ages 53 and 70. Because opinionation more closely resembles Jennings and Markus's forms of passive involvement, we view our findings as consistent with theirs.

In fact, not all forms of active political participation decline with age. Many studies have found that voter turnout in elections actually increases as people age (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; see also Campbell et al., 1960; Glenn & Grimes, 1968). When this evidence is considered in consort with ours and that of Jennings and Markus (1988), there appears to be strong justification for rejecting the hypothesis that old age produces disengagement from all aspects of politics (e.g., Glenn, 1966).

THE GENDER GAPS

Consistent with previous studies, we found that, on average, men are more opinionated than women, and this gender gap appears to be partially mediated by objective political competence. On average, men are more opinionated than women partly because men score higher on objective political competence. Rapoport (1981, 1982) argued that the gender effect is also mediated partly by subjective political competence, but controlling for that variable did not alter the apparent effect of gender on opinionation. As did Rapoport, we found the gender gap to be larger among older birth cohorts and among individuals low in objective political competence. However, controlling for subjective political competence did not eliminate these interactions. Taken together, this evidence discredits the claim that the overall gender gap is mediated by subjective political competence.

In fact, though, our results indicate that simply saying men are more opinionated than women is quite inaccurate. Like other investigators before us, we found that men over age 70 appear to be more opinionated than women over age 70. But among individuals aged 55 to 70, there appeared to be no relation between gender and opinionation. And among individuals under age 40, women appear to be

markedly more opinionated than men. Because this pattern of relations was just as strong in the 1950s as it was in the 1980s, we are reluctant to attribute any of it to changes in socialization brought about by the women's movement (as did Rapoport [1981, 1982]). Instead, we are inclined to view this relation as due to life-cycle differences between men and women. That is, the cultural constraints and role constraints (Kirkpatrick, 1974; McGlen, 1980; Welch, 1977) imposed on men and women at different points in the life cycle may either facilitate or impede individuals' efforts to form political opinions.

Our finding that young women are more opinionated than young men may seem at first to contradict previous studies of political socialization among children. A number of such studies found that young girls evidenced lower levels of opinionation than young boys did (Greenstein, 1965; Hess & Torney, 1967; Hyman, 1959; Remmers & Radler, 1957). However, a closer look at these results reveals that although girls do acquire political opinions more slowly than do boys, girls catch up to boys in this regard before the end of adolescence (see, e.g., Hess & Torney, 1967). It may be that opinionation continues to grow among late-adolescent girls while it stabilizes among late-adolescent boys (though see Rapoport, 1981).

IMPLICATIONS

Our research has some important substantive and methodological implications, two of which we mention here. Methodologically, our findings have implications for the measurement of political expertise. In the past, some investigators have treated measures of opinionation as indicators of political expertise (e.g., Zaller, 1986). Our evidence suggests that opinionation is indeed related to other, more direct measures of political expertise. However, these relations are complex and not always so strong as to support the claim that opinionation, knowledge, and the other dimensions all reflect the same single underlying construct. Furthermore, our results indicate that opinionation may be affected by many variables other than objective political competence. Therefore, we believe that the frequency of expressing political attitudes in a survey should be treated as a measure of opinionation and not as a measure of objective political competence, political sophistication, or political expertise.

Finally, our findings have interesting implications regarding the operation of democracies. The levels of opinionation apparently characteristic of the American public during the last 30 years are quite high (see Table 1). This contrasts sharply with the common view of

the American electorate as having a large apathetic majority and a small opinionated minority of elites (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Neuman, 1986). Of course, perceived pressure to appear informed and opinionated during survey interviews may lead survey respondents to concoct opinions on the spot, and the opinions people express so freely may be uninformed and unwise on occasion. But the fact that the public has opinions to offer at all is one step toward ideal democracy.

From a more general perspective, our evidence has interesting implications regarding the conditions necessary for democracies to function effectively. The single most powerful predictor of opinionation we identified is objective political competence. Furthermore, the effects of cognitive sophistication and perceived system demand for opinionation are substantially reduced at high levels of objective political competence. Therefore, it seems that high levels of objective political competence are sufficient to produce high levels of opinionation. So an electorate apparently need not be well educated and guided by politicians with strong interests in citizen opinion for its citizens to be highly opinionated. Although these factors do have effects, high levels of objective political competence can make up for a lack of them.

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NOTES

1. We view perceived demand for opinionation as only a component of what has traditionally been viewed as perceived government responsiveness or external political efficacy (see Kinder & Sears, 1985).
2. A list of the NES item numbers for the policy attitude items included in the opinionation indices and for the measures of objective political competence, subjective political competence, and perceived system demand can be obtained by writing either author.
3. This operationalization of opinionation was employed by all of the studies cited under "Previous Studies of Political Opinionation," as well as many others not directly relevant here (e.g., Hess & Torney, 1967; Hyman, 1959).

4. Strictly speaking, unstandardized regression coefficients are more informative than are standardized coefficients for assessing the sorts of interactions we consider here. We examined the unstandardized coefficients and found them to tell the same story that the standardized coefficients tell. Because the latter are easier to interpret, we chose to present them in this article.

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MIMICKING POLITICAL DEBATE WITH SURVEY QUESTIONS: THE CASE OF WHITE OPINION ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR BLACKS

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By examining the alterations in opinion induced by alterations in question wording that mimic the ongoing debate among elites, it becomes possible to learn how changes in public opinion can be induced by changes taking place *outside* the survey, in the ordinary, everyday process of democratic discussion. We present evidence in support of this broad claim from a recent national survey in which white Americans were invited to think about affirmative action in which *advantage* or *reverse discrimination*. Framing the issue as unfair advantage as opposed to reverse discrimination produced opinions on affirmative action among whites that were (1) more coherent with their views on other race policies; (2) associated more closely with their opinions on policies plausibly, but not explicitly, implicating race (such as welfare); (3) linked more tightly to negative emotions provoked by preferential treatment; (4) more consistent with their general political views; (5) more evocative of prejudice and misgivings over equal opportunity; and (6) less evocative of the tangible threats that affirmative action might pose to their family and group and of the political principles that affirmative action might violate. These differences suggest that by promoting rival frames, elites may alter how issues are understood and, as a consequence, affect what opinion turns out to be.

The language of politics is never completely still. Through history, the terms used in public discourse over such controversial issues as slavery, suffrage for women, civil rights for blacks, cooperation with the Soviets, and more have changed dramatically. Even at particular moments and within particular debates, the same issue may be discussed in very different ways. In current debates about abortion, for example, each side insists on its own vocabulary; each side rejects the other's language (Luker, 1984). As a more general matter, the entrenchment of some terms and the disappearance of others are often signals of political triumph and defeat. We believe, as political operators do,