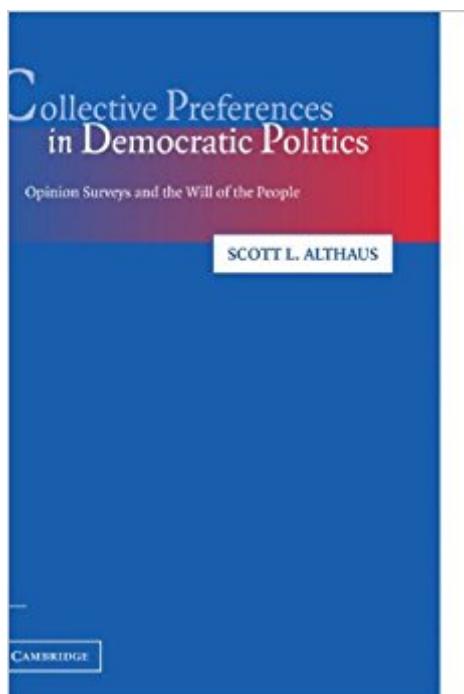


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Collective Preferences In Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys And The Will Of The People



Synopsis

Since so few people appear knowledgeable about public affairs, one might question whether collective policy preferences revealed in opinion surveys accurately convey the distribution of voices and interests in a society. Scott Althaus' comprehensive analysis of the relationship between knowledge, representation, and political equality (in opinion surveys) leads to surprising answers. Knowledge does matter, and the way it is dispensed in society can cause collective preferences to reflect opinions disproportionately. Accordingly, the study can help survey researchers, journalists, politicians, and concerned citizens better appreciate the problems and potentials of the usage of opinion polls to represent the people's voice.

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Customer Reviews

"This is a major work, arguably the most important in the study of public opinion since John Zaller's The Nature of Public Opinion. For many years distinguished scholars have suggested that, although citizens often are ill-informed and erratic in their judgments about politics, their errors and biases tend to cancel out. A comforting thought, if true. Althaus, however, provides the most compelling demonstration to date that it is false." Paul M. Sniderman, Stanford University "No issue is more central to the theory and practice of democratic politics than the relationship between individual public opinion and the collective will of the people. This subject has generated a lively, multi-faceted, and ongoing debate on topics such as how best to measure public opinion, the role of political knowledge in the formation, stability, and expression of public opinion, and the relationship between

opinions and, as Tocqueville put it, 'self interest rightly understood.' Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics is an important and timely contribution to this debate that will be of interest to both public opinion specialists, and more general students of democratic theory and practice. It is an impressive blend of theory and research, is methodologically creative, sophisticated and sound, and is well written and convincingly argued." Michael X. Delli Carpini, University of Pennsylvania"Proponents of democratic decision making usually avert their eyes from the fact that many citizens know little about the issues on which they are asked to make judgments or, even worse, they 'know' things that are factually mistaken. Scott Althaus addresses this problem head-on and finds that variations in knowledge do indeed bias the outcomes of opinion surveys in a troubling way. But not always, and not unavoidably--this is no jeremiad. Instead, Althaus gives sensible, thoughtful, usable suggestions for overcoming problems that most would rather ignore. This is a vitally important book for all who care about both democracy and political fairness." Jennifer L. Hochschild, Harvard University

FOR CATALOGS, OTHER PLACES WHERE SHORT BLURB IS NEEDED: If most people know little about politics, can opinion surveys tell us what people really want from government? Examining the relationships between knowledge, representation, and political equality in opinion surveys suggests some surprising answers. Knowledge does matter, and the way it is distributed in society can cause collective preferences to reflect disproportionately the opinions of some groups more than others.

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