

Paul Lazarsfeld’s Understanding of the 1948 Electoral World and 2020

ANTHONY OBERSCHALL

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

Voting resulted in pioneering knowledge about the political attitudes and behaviors of ordinary people, as well as of methods for study of political process. Paul Lazarsfeld and his team found that voters were not the rational decision makers of economic theory, but neither were they puppets manipulated in mass society. Voters are social beings as influenced by their social milieu and peers as they are with regard to other social and cultural preferences and behaviors. The 1948 election in U.S. politics was fought on longstanding and stable socioeconomic cleavages. Multiculturalism, identity politics, and racial justice were not on the political agenda. Lazarsfeld was mindful that ideological issues might lead to antidemocratic tendencies, as in 1930s Europe. Since the 1950s there have been major changes in the political media and in political culture. This forum article explores the extent to which Lazarsfeld’s findings about the electoral process are applicable in the present time.

Keywords: social milieu and peer influence on voting, socioeconomic differentiation of the electorate, changes in political communications and culture, contemporary antidemocratic tendencies

This article examines how Paul Lazarsfeld’s coauthored analysis of the 1948 election campaign in Elmira, New York—*Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954)—can be applied to the U.S. electoral world of 2020.¹ *Voting* was part of a life-long intellectual program that Lazarsfeld pursued first in Vienna and later at the Bureau of Applied Social Research and Columbia University. He called it “the empirical analysis of action” (Lazarsfeld & Rosenberg, 1955, pp. 387–391) for studying choices and decisions in politics, consumer behavior, mass communications, personal friendships, housing, occupations, and other institutions. On voting choices specifically, he had been puzzled as to why working-class Austrians in the 1920s and 1930s voted for parties that did not represent their interests. In the United States, he had an opportunity to research such issues. He helped pioneer the study of mass communications and showed how polls and surveys could be made to answer analytic questions.

Voting was and remains pioneering research, both for its methods for studying political process and for knowledge about ordinary people’s political attitudes and behavior. The book’s focus is on the voters, their social milieux, how they process political information and influence one another, what changes their choices,

¹ For the sake of brevity, I refer to *Voting*’s three coauthors as Lazarsfeld on occasion. He was the senior researcher, the inspiration for the research, and the originator of the methodology.

and the political and cultural continuities in the political body. The voter, as portrayed in the study, is not the rational decision maker of economic theory, but neither is he a puppet manipulated in mass society. He is a social animal, both influenced by his social milieu and influencing his peers. "The principal agents of influence are not Machiavellian manipulators," Lazarsfeld and his coauthors wrote, "but ordinary family, friends and co-workers" (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 115). On the main, *Voting* is the story of a functioning two-party democracy, with voters holding the political class accountable for governance and for matching policy with grassroots interests. It is also a story of a country in a noncrisis mode and an electorate that has a low intensity engagement in political affairs (Berelson et al., 1954, pp. 22, 25).

The 1948 vote turned on domestic concerns of a socioeconomic character, according to Lazarsfeld and his coauthors (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 10). The Cold War had barely begun; McCarthyism and the communist subversion scare was still two years ahead; race was salient in the South with the Dixiecrat third-party defection but not yet nationwide. By 1948, Republicans had accepted many New Deal reforms. The major socioeconomic party cleavage was over the Taft-Hartley law on labor management relations, and on price controls framed as an anti-inflation measure. For Democrats, inflation threatened the wage gains by labor in the war economy. Republicans were more concerned with cutting government spending and reducing the national debt.

Lazarsfeld and his coauthors (Berelson et al., 1954) distinguished between bread and butter "position" issues arising out of socioeconomic interests and "style" issues like Prohibition, civil liberties, religion and ethnicity, cultural interests, and city versus country. The latter "gain center stage" only when there are no big position issues at stake (p. 185). The style issues of 1948 pale in comparison to the cultural issues that have aroused much passion and animosity since the 1960s: abortion, gender roles, desegregation and race equality, gay marriage, prayer in public schools, and non-White immigration. In late 1940s Elmira, for instance, there was no measurable difference between Republicans and Democrats on the question of whether "the country is better off if not so many foreigners are here" (p. 190). Thus, the authors centered their analysis of political differentiation on class and labor relations rather than the less salient style issues.

The *Voting* coauthors' (1954) research documented the fundamental consensus of both parties and the public on "the rules of the game," the guardrails of democracy: "Elmirans of both parties appear to unite in the beliefs that politics should not involve physical force, fraud and the like, and despite the heat of controversy, the party defeated in elections and legislative struggles should accept the defeat" (p. 192). After the election was over, the book reports, "Republicans accepted Truman as their president" (p. 192). It was "behavior obvious enough to a twentieth century American" (p. 192). That much was obvious in 1948, but by the 2020 election, most Republican lawmakers and voters did not accept the defeat of President Trump, claiming voter fraud and a rigged election despite evidence to the contrary. That is a huge change in the political culture and institutions of America.

The political world of 1948 Elmira was different in many ways from the 2020 U.S. political world, but what exactly was that change and what accounts for it? Did the social psychology of voters change? Did political communications change? Did politicians change? Did political institutions like campaign finance laws and political advertising change? Did the issues change? Did all of the above change and interact in complex fashion?

Voting (Berelson et al., 1954) documented much continuity in political loyalties and differentiation in the electorate. Political values and interests are anchored in social, economic, and religious groups that were stable, the book asserted, because of in-group social interaction, intermarriage, residential proximity, and intergenerational cultural transmission. When the socioeconomic infrastructure of society remains stable, so do political loyalties, attitudes, and behavior.

Voting found an unexpected difference between the white, native-born Protestant Republican majority and Democratic ethnic, racial, and Catholic minorities. Lazarsfeld and his coauthors (Berelson et al., 1954) noted that the Catholic vote had been researched in big cities but not in smaller communities like Elmira (p. 63). This difference persisted even after controls for demographics. As the puzzled authors wrote, "There is a strong 'religious vote' in this country" (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 66). At this time in America, the native white Protestant majority was confident of its dominant status running the country and did not feel threatened by racial, ethnic, non-White, and immigrant groups. In the 1990s and later, economic and cultural insecurity mobilized the White nationalist movement and Republican evangelicals.

The core of *Voting's* (Berelson et al., 1954) research dealt with social influences on voters, media exposure, opinion leaders, and the "two-step flow" of communications tentatively proposed in *Voting's* predecessor study, *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944, pp. 150–158). In the "two steps," information from the media (the "first step") is highlighted and explained to voters by opinion leaders in their social milieu (the "second step"; Berelson et al., 1954).

On political communications, *Voting* (Berelson et al., 1954) found that "the job of informing and persuading voters has been taken over by the mass media" from the local political parties (p. 178). Lazarsfeld and his coauthors judged most news stories to be nonpartisan, but editorials and signed columns in 60% Republican Elmira were pro-Republican, as in the present-day *Wall Street Journal*. News bias was not a flagged issue in 1948, at least for the researchers. By the 2000s, of course, charges of liberal bias became a major political and cultural issue for conservatives.

Lazarsfeld and his coauthors (Berelson et al., 1954) reported some tendency to read and listen to one's own side, but Elmira did not, apparently, live in an ideological media bubble. Forty percent did not follow news about the Democratic and Republican conventions, and only 23% followed both conventions closely. Of the close followers, half of the voters who followed the Republican convention also followed the Democratic convention closely, and three quarters who followed the Democratic convention closely also did the same for the Republican gathering. The one quarter of the population most engaged in politics got information, crucially, from both sides of the political spectrum (p. 243).

In our own era, by contrast, the public gets news most often from digital devices (60%) and TV (40%), rather than radio (16%) or print (10%), according to Pew research data (Shearer, 2021). On digital devices, users reported following news websites, but also social media that lack veracity gatekeepers, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

Social media users are, of course, much more likely to live in an ideological echo chamber than the Elmira of 1948. A study of Twitter found that 84% of the most liberal users followed almost no

conservative media accounts; likewise, 78% of the most conservative users were exposed to almost no liberal accounts (NYU Center for Social Media and Politics, 2020).

In 1948, the major news outlets were staffed with professional gatekeepers. Disinformation and falsehood in the media were not even on the horizon, or at least did not register with the *Voting* authors. Berelson and colleagues (1954) found that the amount of news exposure was correlated with accurate information about the campaign and the candidates' stands on issues (p. 250). The voters' lack of information accuracy was, they found, due to their lack of knowledge and interest, and not to intentional deception and falsehood by political leaders and media opinion entrepreneurs.

By the 2000s, partisan information consumption and content falsehood was common in a large segment of the media ecosystem. Trust in government, political leaders and the media had eroded (Pew Research Center, 2021). Free speech in the marketplace of ideas, in the classical view, was meant to sort falsehood from truth. John Stuart Mill (1859/1947) had maintained that "human judgement . . . can be set right when it is wrong . . . wrong opinion and practices gradually yield to facts and arguments" (p. 20). That was no longer true. In a study of 1.25 million online stories shared by Facebook and Twitter users in the 2016 campaign, a right-wing hyper-partisan media network combined disinformation, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to construct a false reality (Faris et al., 2017). Most disinformation in political discourse is protected by the First Amendment. In 2017, six years after President Obama's birth certificate had been released, 25% of Americans, 51% of Republican identifiers, and 14% of Democrats, said they believed the Obama birther story and 29% said they believed he was a Muslim (Glum, 2017). Falsehoods and character assassination of political rivals were commonplace in political advertising, opinion news, and personal attacks during congressional hearings. Political communications had undergone a huge change since 1948, when the media had strengthened the institutions of democracy.

Voting (Berelson et al., 1954) collected much information on the social influences that help shape political views and behavior, especially from personal associates like friends and coworkers. The main finding was that voters are embedded in social networks that were relatively homogeneous and congenial: Republicans, the finding was, have mostly friends and coworkers that support the Republican Party and likewise for Democrats' friends and coworkers' Democratic Party support (p. 95). Nevertheless, there was some political mixing among friends and coworkers.

In the aggregate, people mostly discuss politics with others like themselves. There was, judging by the book, limited voicing of political differences in interpersonal relations; political controversy was found to be more prevalent in the content of mass media than in private conversation (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 106). Opinion leaders were trusted and consulted for political information in all social groups. Lazarsfeld and his coauthors (1954) found that these local influentials were more informed and interested in political affairs than their friends and neighbors, and that their political attitudes and party loyalty tended to confirm the norms of their shared social milieu (pp. 112–114).

Unlike much else, the homogeneity of small social circles has not changed much. Pew Research Center (2014) found that 63% of consistent conservatives and 49 of consistent liberals agree that most of their close friends share their political views. These figures are not much different from Elmira in 1948.

In *Voting* (Berelson et al., 1954), the combined effect of social influences and media was reported to harmonize political attitudes, beliefs, and behavior with one's social group. At the individual level, voting was like a cultural and social taste and not a rational cost-benefit analysis. But at the group level, socioeconomic formations and their parties and leaders articulated policies and programs that do match their socioeconomic interests, according to *Voting*, and the social influences in the electorate then aligned voters' views and choices with their social groups and political leaders. Elections, to Lazarsfeld and his collaborators, were a manifestation of a peaceful democratic class struggle.

Lazarsfeld had grown up in the turbulent democratic politics of Austria after World War I. Parliament was dissolved in 1933 and democratic government ended. Austro-fascism ended with annexation of Austria to Nazi Germany in 1938, with hundreds of thousand cheering the triumphal arrival of Hitler in Vienna. As a socialist intellectual and social scientist, Lazarsfeld was puzzled why many working-class voters did not vote their interest and were seduced by the Fascist and Nazi drive for unification.

Lazarsfeld was thus not unmindful that in the wings of his narrative about U.S. politics there lurked some potential antidemocratic tendencies, like propaganda intentionally sowing dissension. In fact, he later studied the effects of McCarthyism on higher education (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958). For Lazarsfeld and his *Voting* coauthors, perceptual distortion of the adversary

increases the objective differences between "we" and "they" . . . if carried to the extreme, as in some European countries in recent years, it makes for a unidimensional or monolithic distinction between good and bad people (in religion, in status, in culture and in politics), and it is a danger to a pluralistically organized democracy. (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 86)

Polarization has indeed become a political fact in the contemporary U.S. Pew Research Center (2014) has highlighted the "the rising tide of antipathy between parties" (para. 1). In 1994, about 15% of Democrats and Republican viewed the other party "very unfavorably." By 2014, that number had climbed to 40%. Twenty-seven percent of Democrats and 36% of Republicans had come to view the other party as a "threat to the nation's well-being" (para. 3). Animosity pervades not only the electorate but even more so the Congress, opinion news media, campaign advertising, and social media messaging.

Recall that, in *Voting* (Berelson et al., 1954), the authors distinguished between position (bread and butter, socioeconomic) issues providing tangible gains, and "style" issues, like civil rights and immigration, providing symbolic gratification. In today's politics and parlance, style issues are "identity politics," "multiculturalism," "diversity," and similar manifestations of culture conflict (Schlesinger, 1994). For Lazarsfeld and his coauthors (1954), style issues could be "invented" and manipulated by propaganda: "subjective perception does not always reflect objective reality." In the broad sweep of history, "the big issues combine position and style aspects, like slavery" (Berelson et al., 1954, pp. 184-185).

Big issues have become the political reality in the 2000s. Contention over abortion, gay marriage, non-White immigration, gun control, religious freedom, and racial justice coincide with globalization, deindustrialization, growing inequality, and economic insecurity for the non-college educated (Reich, 2020). Propaganda in politics and the media has become pervasive and ubiquitous, with a rejection of evidence

and arguments based on scientific and other objective methods. The right-wing media system has created an alternative reality of falsehoods, misinformation, disinformation, conspiracies, hoaxes, and character assassinations. A fundamentally misleading view of reality has been successfully marketed to a part of the public by political opportunists, media opinion entrepreneurs, and demagogues.

For estimating the size of the public that inhabits this alternative reality, one can scan opinion polls on issues and events that deny basic facts: Barack Obama is a Muslim; Obama was not born in the United States; the 2020 election was rigged against Donald Trump and fraud cheated him of victory; Democratic leaders engage in child trafficking. On these and similar issues, and discounting for some partisan cheerleading in answers to polls, between 20% to 30% of the politically engaged public lives in an alternative reality, mostly on the political right. With a total of 150 million voters in 2020, that amounts to between 30 to 45 million voters, a formidable political force.

Alt-reality of this kind did not exist in 1948. It is a major change in political culture. There are now two parallel and contradictory politico-media systems and modes of political discourse (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017). In the traditional and still-dominant system, described by the *Voting* authors in 1948, vigorous debate over liberal and conservative ideas and policies matched the reality of socioeconomic interests. The Elmira Republican leadership in 1948, and the Republican Party nationwide, represented the business and white-collar communities (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 160).

Since that time, as the Pew Research Center (2020) has documented, the white working class has largely abandoned the New Deal Democratic coalition of the 1930s to 1990s, arguably because the Democratic Party neglected their economic insecurity from globalization and promoted multiculturalism favoring minorities while disrespecting traditional working-class culture. The share of total Democratic voters who were White, non-college declined from 58% in 1996 to 30% in 2019, and 57% of them were "Republican leaning" (p. 2).

Meanwhile, the GOP has become a coalition of previously Democratic White working-class voters, traditional Republicans, and conservative evangelicals that form the Trump base. The base is courted by GOP politicians because it largely determines who gets to run for office, gets elected, how they vote in Congress, and who runs the executive branch and the judiciary at the federal and state level. The stable socioeconomic infrastructure of U.S. politics studied by Lazarsfeld has been reconfigured by economic and cultural changes, a huge shift in the body politic.

In sum, what has changed and what has not? The core findings about social influence and the social psychology of voting have held up these 75 years, but the socioeconomic infrastructure and political institutions in which voters were embedded in 1948 are very different today. As a result, many voters have become more partisan, some live in an ideological bubble; others are very angry at institutional leaders and seduced by demagoguery.

Professional gatekeeping has all but disappeared from the new modes of political communications like talk radio and social media. In the alternative media, the public is exposed to a huge volume of unchallenged political falsehood and disinformation. Political institutions have changed: The guardrails of

democracy are under assault (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The social bases of politics have changed: Much of the White working class has abandoned the Democrats, and the Republican Party was wrenched from its traditional roots by white nationalism. Political divisions have changed with cultural and identity issues piled on top of socioeconomic differences.

For understanding these changes on electoral behavior, Lazarsfeld and his collaborators left us a lasting framework of sociopolitical analysis in *Voting* (Berelson et al., 1954). At the heart of that analysis are two key ideas. The first is the stability of socioeconomic groups and of linked economic issues. Disturb that stability and expect uncertainty and political realignment in both the political class and in the grassroots electorate. The second idea is that cultural and symbolic issues are subject to manipulation and "perceptual distortion" by propaganda and political manipulators. They increase "we-versus-they" political polarization, and mismatch political beliefs and attitudes with reality. When joined, the two processes endanger democracy, as happened in 1930s Austria and other European countries, and as is happening in the contemporary United States.

References

- Benkler, Y., Faris, R., Roberts, H., & Zuckerman, E. (2017, March 3). Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>
- Berelson, B., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & McPhee, W. (1954). *Voting: A study of opinion formation in a presidential campaign*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Faris, R., Roberts, H., Etling, B., Bourassa, N., Zuckerman, E., & Benkler, Y. (2017). *Partisanship, propaganda, and disinformation: Online media and the 2016 US presidential election*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Research. Retrieved from <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/08/mediacloud>
- Glum, J. (2017, December 11). Some Republicans still think Obama was born in Kenya as Trump resurrects birther conspiracy theory. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-birther-obama-poll-republicans-kenya-744195>
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. New York, NY: Duell, Sloan & Pearce.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Rosenberg, M. (1955). *The language of social research: A reader in the methodology of the social sciences*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Thielens, W., Jr. (1958). *The academic mind: Social scientists in a time of crisis*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. New York, NY: Broadway.

Mill, J. S. (1947). *On liberty*. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts. (Original work published 1859)

NYU Center for Social Media and Politics. (2020, May 18). *How many people live in echo chambers on social media?* Retrieved from <https://medium.com/the-center-for-social-media-and-politics/how-many-people-live-in-echo-chambers-on-social-media-ace66cd0f74b>

Pew Research Center. (2014, June 12). *Political polarization of the American public*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

Pew Research Center. (2020, June 2). *In changing U.S. electorate, race and education remain stark dividing lines*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/02/in-changing-u-s-electorate-race-and-education-remain-stark-dividing-lines/>

Pew Research Center. (2021, May 17). *Public trust in government: 1958–2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>

Reich, R. B. (2020). *The system: Who rigged it, how we fix it*. New York, NY: Random House.

Schlesinger, A. M., Jr. (1994). *The disuniting of America: Reflections on a multicultural society*. New York, NY: John Benjamins.

Shearer, E. (2021, January 12). *More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices*. Retrieved from <https://pewrsr.ch/2MZqns7>