A central tenet of democratic theory holds that public policy should be in accordance with citizens’ preferences (see Dahl 1971, 1989). A close relationship between public policy and public preferences in modern democracies cannot be taken for granted, however. Instead, it is an empirical issue whether the public policy decisions that are primarily made by elected elites closely correspond to citizens’ preferences (Powell 2000). The closeness of the mass-elite linkage depends, inter alia, upon whether elites have incentives to pay close attention to and be responsive to public preferences (see, e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010). The incentives, in turn, depend on whether policy preferences play a role in citizens’ political behavior. Leaving aside referenda on policy issues and issue-related direct political action, voting behavior is of crucial importance for the linkage between citizen preferences and policy decisions. When casting their votes, citizens might signal policy salience to elites. To this end, they can vote in accordance with their policy preferences or with their evaluations of representatives’ prior performance. Thereby, they hold politicians accountable and provide them with incentives for policy responsiveness. If citizens do not rely on policy attitudes, however, politicians will hardly have any incentive to respond to public opinion when making policy decisions. As a result, the connection between public opinion and public policy is likely to become tenuous or even inexist- ent. The smooth working of representative democracy is thus an empirical issue (see as a classic Key 1961).

The field of public opinion and voting behavior addresses important issues in this process of political representation in modern democracy. Scholars study the nature, sources, and dynamics of public opinion which they usually conceive of as the aggregation of citizen attitudes as measured in surveys. Research on voting behavior aims at describing and, primarily, explaining voting behavior. In attempting to identify the determinants of electoral behavior, many scholars explore the role of attitudes towards public policies. So this field contributes significantly to improving knowledge about the process of political decision-making in democracy.

This essay aims at giving an overview of research on public opinion and voting behavior that is located at the intersection of several academic disciplines, including political science, psychology, and sociology. The overview starts by addressing research on voting behavior. This section presents key models of voter choice and summarizes key findings. It then turns to the question of long-term electoral change. The next section deals with research on public opinion. Therein, the results of classic studies are presented as well as the debates they engendered. Then this section turns to the issue of the sources of public opinion and the implications of the respective findings for the notion of public opinion. The penultimate section explores recent developments and suggests directions for future research, both in substantive and methodological terms. The concluding section summarizes key findings and discusses implications for the role of citizens in democracy.

Models of Voting Behavior and Classical Findings

When elections became the vehicle for citizens to elect political elites, politicians, pundits, and scholars alike began to speculate about the factors driving voting behavior. Leaving aside early works, e.g., Siegfried’s (1913) analysis of voting behavior in France, the determinants of vote choice became a subject of scholarly studies in the mid-20th century. Building on data from surveys, scholars developed several models of voter choice. Given the focus of this essay, the below review will put special emphasis on the role of public policy attitudes in affecting voting behavior.

Utilizing data from an innovative seven-wave regional panel survey, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues demonstrated in their ingenious analysis of electoral decision-making, The People’s Choice (1944), that many voters had already made up their mind several months before the 1940 US-presidential election (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). They found only a small number of party changers during the campaign and thus concluded that the campaign primarily served to reinforce already existing political predispositions. Moreover, these political predispositions were found...
to be determined by stable socio-demographic characteristics, including SES, religious denomination, and place of residence. Their often-cited conclusion was thus: “A man thinks, politically, as he is, socially.” It is tempting to read the study as suggesting some kind of social-determinism. Yet, this interpretation is at odds with the authors’ line of argument which accounted for their findings in terms of interpersonal communication (see also Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954).1 Irrespective of this question, however, the evidence does not support the notion that public policy issues played a major role in vote choice.

Lazarsfeld et al.’s findings on US elections dovetail nicely with research on voting behavior in Europe. Given the continent’s history, accounting for European voting behavior in terms of social characteristics appears quite obvious. It thus does not come as a surprise that in their account of the evolution of Western European party systems Lipset and Rokkan introduced the concept of social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This concept was not designed to explain voting behavior. Yet, it builds on the notion of social groupings regularly voting for particular parties, e.g., workers for socialist parties and Catholics for Christian-Democratic parties. It is thus closely related to and engendered research that addresses the role of social characteristics in shaping voter choices. Given the stability of social characteristics, this research suggests that voting behavior is rather stable over time. Moreover, while coalitions between social groupings and political parties are interest-based, this model suggests that voters do not respond strongly to policy issues of the day nor deliver performance evaluations in the polling booth.

In their landmark study The American Voter (1960), Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes built on contemporary social psychology to account for voter choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; see also Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954). In their model, voter choice is determined by political perceptions and evaluations which in turn are affected by prior experience. Fully understanding the evolution of a person’s voting behavior thus requires studying a host of past events included in the famous notion of a “funnel of causality”. However, it suffices to examine political attitudes at the time of voting to explain voter choice. Campbell et al. identified three proximate motivational factors as particularly important: party identification, issue orientation, and candidate orientation. They conceptualized party identification as a longstanding psychological attachment to a political party that serves as a perceptual filter and is thus resistant to change, but not completely immutable. While this factor lends stability to attitudes and voting behavior, issue and candidate orientations explain party changes. In contrast to more sociological accounts, this model is thus better suited to explain both stable and changing voting behavior. When exploring the 1952 and 1956 US presidential election, the Michigan scholars found that party identification was of pre-eminent importance. Attitudes toward political issues, by contrast, appeared to play a considerably smaller role. Accordingly, voters were not primarily concerned with public policy when casting their votes.

To better understand the role of issue orientations, scholars developed new concepts. Stokes (1963) distinguished between position and valence issues. Accordingly, on valence issues parties compete for electoral support by demonstrating their capability of achieving a goal whose desirability is (virtually) uncontrovertial among parties and the electorate. Peace and prosperity are cases in point. Concerning position issues, by contrast, parties differ on which policy option to pursue so that voters can choose according to which party’s position fits best with their stance. Examples include the issues of whether to close down nuclear power plants and whether to legalize abortion. Following Downs’ notion of spatial party competition, voters were originally assumed to vote for parties whose platforms are close to their ideal policy point when voting on position issues (Downs 1957). It was objected, however, that this proximity calculus was too complicated to describe voters’ decision-making. Instead, Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) argued that voters employ a directional calculus, i.e. they vote for the party which takes (within a reasonable range) their preferred position with greater intensity. Another important distinction refers to the temporal dimension of issue voting. Accordingly, retrospective orientations describe evaluations of past accomplishments, whereas prospective orientations refer to future expectations. The evidence suggests that, irrespective of employing the proximity or the directional model (e.g., Lewis and King 1999; Merrill and Grofman 1999), position issues in general have a smaller impact than valence issues. Moreover,