



Defining Public Will

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Abstract

Scientific elaboration of “public will” would enhance the concept’s analytical usefulness and contribute to improved understanding in various fields, including political science and public policy. Previous work has utilized the term but has jumped the crucial stage of formally defining public will as a conceptual variable. This project constructs a definitional system that breaks the concept into components and offers operationalizations and assessment targets. Analysis begins with consideration of social systems and their direct ties with other definitional components like shared recognition of the problem and of proposed means of addressing the problem. Resolve to address the situation and to sustain collective action are also essential components. The project then applies the definitional system through a brief case study of firearm control and considers various scholarly implications. The definitional system emphasizes the simultaneous existence of multiple “publics” and argues against using public will synonymously with majority public opinion.

The term “public will” carries with it connotations of democracy, participatory government, grassroots movements, and revolution that give the term rhetorical power. The term is a favorite of politicians and media, often used as a more forceful-sounding variant of majority public opinion; the term has also shown up recently in research dealing with topics such as vaccine policies (see e.g., Black and Plotkin 2012) and public health campaigns (Pertschuk 2010). Public will holds significant promise for social scientists engaged in multiple areas of inquiry. The aim here is to provide a definitional structure that allows the complex conceptual variable of “public will” to bridge

theoretical gaps, to help understand reciprocal influences in political systems, and to contribute otherwise to applications of causal theories. Doing so requires striking the right balance between specificity and flexibility. Turning public will into a useful conceptual variable means delineating it from other concepts like public opinion, interest/pressure groups, coalitions, and social movements while retaining enough breadth and flexibility to interact with these varied, important concepts and with different policy process theories.

The academic literature has paid little attention to explicit definition and conceptual development despite public will's apparently crucial nature to a number of theoretical families. The current project addresses this gap in understanding by constructing a formal definition to facilitate analysis, with a focus on scientific operations like description and operationalization. At a minimum, public will is a vital component in the areas of: (1) political participation and government accountability; (2) the public policy-making process; and (3) communication efforts aimed at producing sociopolitical change. A good deal of the early conceptual development for public will emerged from the latter area, especially as scholars discussed participatory change efforts in the field of development communication. A more fully developed public will concept can improve understanding and facilitate analysis in all these areas.

The scholarly literature has tackled the concept of "political will" more directly and in a manner that informs the current efforts (Post, Raile, and Raile 2010; see also Andrews 2004; Brinkerhoff 2000; Kpundeh 1998). Post, Raile, and Raile (2010, 659) construct a short-form definition of political will as "the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem" and then engage in a more formal and extensive definitional process. Public will deserves the same treatment, which would allow for more sophisticated and direct examination of interactions between public will and political will. As detailed later, these interactions are changing in important ways that make having common theoretical interfaces between political will and public will increasingly vital.

As an initial step, the current project defines "public will" as a *social system's shared recognition of a particular problem and resolve to address the situation in a particular way through sustained collective action*. Central to this definition are the ideas that many different "publics" can exist at any given time and that a public need not represent a majority of the population to be meaningful. These ideas are crucial if researchers are to employ the definitional system usefully in conjunction with causal theories.

This project first considers the importance of the public will concept to a number of subject areas and theoretical families and then provides an overview of previous use of the idea of public will. The section after breaks the formal definition into components, operationalizes these components, and provides ideas concerning instrumentation and assessment targets. Following a brief case study on firearm control that applies the definitional system, the project concludes by considering implications and extensions of this work.

Importance of Public Will

The following section focuses on three broad and interconnected areas in which having a system for defining public will is particularly helpful. First, the topics of political participation and government accountability imply public will. Second, the public policy-making process is an arena for publics to exert themselves through participation. Third, communication plays a crucial role in building and relaying public will, often within the policy-making process.

Political Participation and Government Accountability

The idea of a public being able to agree upon and articulate its preferences is a fundamental assumption for the “rule of the people” and for delegate models (see Gerber 1996) that lay out how representative democracy should work. According to the bottom-up ideal type portrayed by the delegate model, democratically accountable governments attempt to discern the will of the public(s) and translate that will through various mechanisms into authoritative policies. Failure to do so can lead to unwanted accountability at the polls. Misalignment between the preferences of political elites and the general population can produce political conflict and hamper effective governance as well. As discussed later, political elites attempt to shape mass views in top-down ways to avoid conflict and accountability.

In democratic regimes, the idea of public will becomes especially salient when citizens feel that accountability relationships have eroded. In the United States, for example, a sizeable segment of the population believes that corporate and other special interests have become too influential and that politicians have become unresponsive to the will of broader publics. Historically low confidence in Congress is one consequence of such concerns (see Gallup 2013). In nondemocratic regimes, this misalignment can spur serious and violent antiregime behaviors. Perhaps the most spectacular consequence of such misalignment in recent years is behavior like that witnessed during the “Color Revolutions” in the former Soviet and Balkan states and during the “Arab Spring.” A comprehensive grasp of public will would enrich analysis of such situations in both democratic and nondemocratic regimes.

A number of conceptualizations and measures of democracy consider the ability of publics to express themselves to be an inextricable part of democracy. Levine and Molina’s (2011) look at “procedural” democracy proposes that participation, accountability, and responsiveness to the “popular will” are core dimensions of democratic quality. Additionally, Freedom House’s (2013) well-known measure of democracy incorporates a variety of political rights and civil liberties, including those related to assembly, expression, and participation. Understanding public will is an important precursor to evaluating accountability, responsiveness, and participation opportunities; analysts would benefit from knowing what publics actually want when trying to ascertain whether those publics are truly free to express themselves.

One way researchers have assessed accountability in democratic governments is by examining the correspondence between public opinion and public policies. Such research suggests, at least in the U.S. context, that public policies and public opinion tend to respond to one another in general ways (see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Wlezien 1995). However, the general or “global” nature of public opinion greatly complicates the task of linking public opinion to relatively specific public policies (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Other research considers the conditions under which public opinion is likely to have a greater effect on public policy making; in other words, public opinion is not always “effective” public opinion capable of influencing political actors (Blumer 1948). Characteristics of a particular opinion, including intensity, stability, salience, and consistency, are important (see e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983). Criticisms of polling (e.g., Moore 2008) also stoke concerns about drawing conclusions from polling data. The concept of public will embraces these ideas of effectiveness and opinion characteristics while recognizing limitations of public opinion data.

Public Policy-Making Process

Public will is also critical to various theoretical approaches for understanding public policy making in democracies. Previous work on public will has claimed that a goal of building public will is to influence public policy (see e.g., Dorfman, Ervice, and Woodruff 2002; Leiderman, Wolf, and York 1997; Salmon, Fernandez, and Post 2010; Salmon, Post, and Christensen 2003). The current treatment focuses on systems theory and group-oriented theories of the public policy process. David Easton’s (1965) application of systems theory to politics described “demands” and “support” as inputs to the policy-making process. Easton (1965, 38) defined demands as “an expression of opinion that an authoritative allocation with regard to a particular subject matter should or should not be made by those responsible for doing so” and discussed how actions, attitudes, and sentiments could all serve as forms of support (159). Easton explicitly distinguished demands from public opinion. Scientific definition of the public will concept would aid in understanding the nature of political demands and support, as well as how they exert pressure within the political system.

Group theories identify the wills of certain “publics” as highly influential in policy making. For example, the well-developed and scientifically focused Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) proposes that advocacy coalitions, which potentially include a variety of political elites from within and outside government, compete against each other within a policy subsystem to determine policy outcomes (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier and Weible 2007; Weible *et al.* 2011). ACF researchers propose that public opinion serves as an exogenous short-term constraint and a potential resource for actors in the policy subsystem (Sabatier and Weible 2007), but have urged further work in investigating how public opinion fits within the framework (Weible *et al.* 2011).

Expanding on the advocacy coalition idea, the “policy topography” model advocates for broadly examining public opinion, linked policy subsystem clusters, and policy venues as they operate within a “trans-subsystem framework” (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009). This model recognizes reciprocal causation among public opinion, the activities of policy entrepreneurs, and issue understanding. In this model, public opinion becomes a “foundational part” of the broader trans-subsystem framework—that is, the political system—and a feature of the policy topography (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009).

Public will is often necessary for the successful creation and implementation of authoritative public policies; yet publics come in different shapes and sizes, with different levels of cohesion, formality, and resolve. Analysts need a better understanding of what a particular “public” is and what “support” looks like. When applied conjointly with causal theories of the policy process, answers to these questions also potentially enhance predictive power in determining which group is likely to prevail. Ultimately, a well-defined concept that can describe the extent and quality of public support seems useful for a range of policy process researchers.

Communication and Change

Despite the inclusion of feedback, environmental pressures, and other complexity in Easton’s (1965, 74) system, the process was essentially a unidirectional loop. Demands and support fed into a governmental process that produced decisions that in turn influenced demands and support. One of the major changes to politics in the decades since Easton’s analysis has been the ever-increasing sophistication of top-down tools designed to generate demands and support within the system, effectively reversing the flow. Publics and policy makers often influence one another in bidirectional ways (Kraft and Kamieniecki 2007) in a policy environment that has become more complex and cacophonous (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011).

One way of looking at increasing top-down influence is to consider the role of “policy entrepreneurs” in the policy-making process. Policy entrepreneurs are “advocates for proposals or for the prominence of an idea” and can be individuals or groups, and can be located inside or outside government (Kingdon 2003, 122). While politicians now often engage in entrepreneurial activities themselves, entrepreneurs outside the population of formal decision makers are also political elites in that they wield disproportionate influence. Policy entrepreneurs, inside and outside government, attempt to shape both political will and public will.

Today politicians manipulate demands and support in complex ways, often with the help of other policy entrepreneurs. Recent electoral cycles in the United States have seen “publics” being diced up into ever-smaller groups and “microtargeted” with sophisticated marketing techniques. Political communication techniques are key tools for policy entrepreneurs as they carry out functions such as setting agendas and opening “windows of opportunity”

for policy making (Kingdon 2003) or defining issues and shopping ideas in various policy “venues” (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Entrepreneurs use techniques like issue framing (Druckman 2001; Riker 1986), manipulation of symbols (Edelman 1967; Stone 2002), use of policy surrogates (Nie 2003), and careful design of “grassroots” efforts to build public will.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), another theory of the policy-making process, is a relatively new framework that has explored such ideas in novel ways (see Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011). The NPF uses literary concepts like settings, plots, characters, and morals of the story to analyze the complex narratives attached to policy initiatives; the crafters of these narratives aim to shape the support for particular policies through story telling (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011). Essentially, then, the NPF deals with the creation, maintenance, and adjustment of publics and what those publics want. The NPF examines how this happens at the micro (individual), meso (groups or coalitions in a policy subsystem), and macro (institutional/cultural) levels of analysis (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011). Researchers would benefit from understanding more concerning the targets of communicative efforts and concerning the mechanics of constructing publics.

Finally, as discussed in the following section, scholars of development communication and social change campaigns have advanced ideas relevant to public will. Yet important questions remain. How does a person know that she is facilitating the emergence of public will without a clear definition? How does a person measure the success of public will campaigns without a clear benchmark?

Research Relevant to Public Will

The term “public will” materialized as scholars, government agencies, and foundation executives questioned the effectiveness of their previous efforts to bring about planned social change in the developed and developing worlds (see discussion in Friedmann 1992; Mansell 1982; Rogers 1976). The “participatory” approach (see Odugbemi and Jacobson 2008) that arose from these deliberations was deemed a departure from the traditional “diffusion” approach with its underpinnings in modernization theory (see overviews in Jacobson 2003; Morris 2003; Waisbord 2001). Diffusion researchers viewed individuals’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as problematic and proposed using information and persuasion techniques to influence these individuals. Waisbord (2001) described the newer approach as being guided by theories of dependency and participation, which call for community empowerment and support for participatory processes (i.e., greater recognition of emergent public will). These theories also advocate for communities defining and implementing their own agendas for change. Individuals become a resource for participation and mobilization to address problems collectively, while communities introduce information horizontally to generate a dialogue.

Ideas arising from the Communication for Social Change (CSC) initiative paralleled the participatory ideas being advanced by development communication theorists. CSC served as a “process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want, and how they can get it” (Gray-Felder and Deane 1999, 8). The CSC model similarly emphasized such notions as empowerment, participation, access to information, horizontal communication, and structural change (Figueroa *et al.* 2002).

However, discussion already was shifting toward possible integration of the two approaches to development communication (Waisbord 2001) and toward the “false dichotomy” between them (Morris 2003, 241). Convergence became evident in the way diffusion scholars discussed the role that empowerment (a participatory concept) plays in organizing for social change (Rogers and Singhal 2003). Additionally, the CSC initiative, which otherwise seemed to sit squarely in the participatory camp, employed terminology from the diffusion approach in discussing the transfer of knowledge (Morris 2003). This recognition of complex and reciprocal causality figures prominently into the current project’s examination of public will.

Although this previous work is relevant, public will has yet to be defined in a manner that facilitates in-depth analysis. A number of researchers have developed definitional fragments or subconcepts, including researchers dedicated to defining and describing social change or public will “campaigns” (see Coffman 2002; Dorfman, Ervice, and Woodruff 2002; Post, Salmon, and Raile 2008; Salmon, Post, and Christensen 2003). Other relevant research has distinguished between public will as “an expression of how the public feels and acts” and public will *work* as the “strategies required to alter public feeling and action” (Leiderman, Wolf, and York 1997, 2). This research also recognizes the multiplicity of roles citizens play in a society, with different respective interests, stakes, and access points for attempting to mobilize their participation (Leiderman, Wolf, and York 1997); in other words, an individual can be a member of multiple different “publics.” More recently, a consulting firm provided a definition of “public will building” as “a communication approach that builds public support for social change by integrating grassroots outreach methods with traditional mass media tools in a process that connects an issue to the existing, closely held values of individuals and groups” (Metropolitan Group 2009, 3). Finally, Salmon, Fernandez, and Post (2010) emphasize how public will is geared toward influencing public policy and changes in structural conditions and how public will is tied inextricably to the ideas of organizing and mobilizing.

Basic Definitional Components

Some work in the development communication and social change literatures has focused on public will interventions—variously referred to as public will “work,” “campaigns,” or “building.” Such research aids in understanding how public will takes shape, how it brings about sociopolitical change, and how it

interacts with government outcomes. However, this previous work has not fully defined and operationalized public will.

Formally defining public will follows the work of Post, Raile, and Raile (2010), who break down the definition of political will into four components and provide operationalization considerations for the effective analysis of political will. The definition of public will provided again in the current project synthesizes across the work on public will in recent years while paralleling the work on political will: *Public will is a social system's shared recognition of a particular problem and resolve to address the situation in a particular way through sustained collective action.* The definition breaks down into the following components or subconcepts:

1. Social system;
2. Shared recognition of a particular problem;
3. Resolve to address the situation;
4. In a particular way; and
5. Through sustained collective action.

Table 1 includes means of operationalization and assessment targets for each of these components, while the following subsections elaborate on each component separately. This treatment does not delve much into specific measurement and indicator issues, as doing so could hamper the use of the concept across contexts. Careful examination of the components makes clear that they are interdependent. Rather than posing a problem of circularity, the connections among definitional components or subconcepts enhance conceptual integrity here.

Differentiating public will from a “social movement” is necessary. A social movement can be an active manifestation of a certain degree of public will, but it is not public will in itself (see Salmon, Fernandez, and Post 2010). The social movement concept emphasizes contentious collective activities like protests (Tilly 2004), whereas public will emphasizes communicative processes that shape understanding, motivation, and intention. One would expect *successful* social movements to be based on a strong public will, but public will can exist apart from social movements. Finally, social movement research essentially concerns building and mobilizing public will.¹

Two basic complications in assessing public will are also worth examining. As just discussed, the idea of “will” is intentional (Post, Raile, and Raile 2010), as in the willingness to do something (Coffman 2002; Dorfman, Ervice, and Woodruff 2002). Incorporating action directly into the definition therefore produces some conceptual slippage. Although indirect factors like incentive structures are helpful, assessing resolve and commitment to sustained collective action becomes difficult if you exclude action completely. A compromise is to

¹ See the discussion of political opportunity theory in Meyer (2004).

Table 1. Analyzing Public Will

Definition Component	Operationalization	Instrumentation and Assessment Targets
(1) Social system	(a) Interconnected people, groups, organizations, or subsystems	(a1) Association via information, monetary flows (especially related to other definitional components below) (a2) Social identities and cleavages
(2) Shared recognition of a particular problem	(a) Common belief something should be done about situation (i.e., problem status) (b) Use of similar frame and terminology for problem	(a1) Directionality of attitudes and beliefs about problem status (a2) Nature and volume of expressions of concern (b1) Convergence in statements and beliefs about the situation and its causes
(3) Resolve to address the situation	(a) Perceived collective efficacy (b) Willingness to commit significant resources	(a1) Beliefs about capability of social system to effect change (b1) Credible commitments to expend resources (depending on existing capacity and capabilities and on preliminary expenditures of money, time) (b2) Stakeholder incentives and motivations (b3) Strength and salience of attitudes and beliefs
(4) In a particular way	(a) Use of similar frame and terminology for means of addressing situation	(a1) Directionality of attitudes and beliefs about particular means of addressing situation (a2) Convergence in statements and beliefs about proposed means of addressing situation
(5) Through sustained collective action	(a) Commitment to collective action (b) Intention to sustain collective action	(a1) Evidence of group formalization and identification (b1) Stability over time of beliefs and attitudes (b2) Level of publicity of commitments

consider preliminary activities that might indicate commitment to larger sociopolitical change efforts. A second complication is assessing public will without influencing or changing it. Researchers taking an action research approach to social issues offer guidance on how to tackle such issues in practice (see Greenwood and Levin 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2006).

Component 1: Social System

Assessment of public will starts with the identification of a *social system*. Rogers (2003, 23) defines a social system as “a set of interrelated units that are

engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal. The members or units of a social system may be individuals, informal groups, organizations, and/or subsystems.” Importantly, this definition incorporates communication, which is an inseparable element of community (Craig 1999; Underwood and Frey 2008). A collection of individuals not engaged in communicative activities (e.g., goal setting and problem solving) is not meaningful for producing sociopolitical change. Consequently, the existence of a social system for purposes of public will depends on other communicative components of public will.

The nature of communicative activities and of social systems themselves may vary considerably. At the local level, interactions in a social system may be frequent and highly inclusive. As the size of the social system increases, each member likely will interact directly with a smaller proportion of the social system so that in some ways the social system represents an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006). This issue of relative size is an important one because the public will concept shares with the political will concept the characteristic that these are continuous conceptual variables for which binary thresholds for change often exist (see Post, Raile, and Raile 2010); in other words, social systems have to be large or important enough (Jacobson 2003) to surpass a “tipping point” that initiates change (Metropolitan Group 2009).

Additionally, a social system may be fairly formal and organized, like a member-based interest group or an advocacy coalition, or may be more loosely organized and awaiting a focusing event or policy entrepreneur to provide greater cohesion. A social system is a broader, more adaptable concept than an interest group or advocacy coalition. Even when such groups constitute a “social system,” a social system is only part of the complex concept of public will. Social systems may be narrower than, equal to, or broader than advocacy coalitions; further, the unit of analysis for public will is not necessarily the policy subsystem.

Evidence of interconnections among people, groups, organizations, or subsystems is ultimately what matters for purposes of assessing public will (see operationalization in Table 1). Recognition of different levels is important because communicative activities can take place within any of these levels of social interaction (Jacobson 2003). Though they serve as only indirect instruments, social identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and social cleavages might be a useful starting point for analysis of social systems. However, the potential existence of many different “publics” and the fact that individuals often have multiple meaningful identities—sometimes pulling in different directions (Lipset 1981)—greatly complicate such analysis. The importance of different social, political, and economic contexts to communication processes (noted by Mansell 1982) also contributes to this complexity. Political opportunity theory (see Meyer 2004), geared toward studying social movements, similarly emphasizes the importance of context. Fortunately, the other components of the definition provide structure and cohesion for the identification of social systems. Researchers can use common “flows” seen in

network analyses, like information and money, to identify the social system, particularly as these flows relate to the other definitional components.

Component 2: Shared Recognition of a Particular Problem

The second definitional component is *shared recognition of a particular problem*. In the public policy literature, an issue becomes a “problem” when people believe government should do something concerning the situation (Kingdon 2003). Similarly, a situation is problematic in the public will definitional system when the social system believes that something should be done to address a situation. However, the members of the social system have to focus their attention on the *same* particular problem (see Metropolitan Group 2009; Salmon, Post, and Christensen 2003) if the other definitional components of public will are to be meaningful. Disparate interpretations of the problem, or a “lack of consensus” (Leiderman, Wolf, and York 1997), will likely produce a lack of unity and commitment within the social system, as well as disparate ideas concerning potential ways to address the situation. Consequently, understanding how shared recognition of a particular problem emerges is an important element of assessing public will. As mentioned earlier, this shared recognition contributes to identifying the social system, as members share meanings and values and influence one another (underwood and Frey 2008).

The definition of problems, the establishment of agendas, and the spreading of information often fall to policy entrepreneurs (alternatively called “claims-makers” or “activists”). Entrepreneurs make the case that some situation, public policy, social trend, or event constitutes a problem in need of action and then attempt to draw widespread attention to that problem. Alternatively, and more fitting with participatory approaches, a facilitator may work with people or groups collectively to tease out an understanding of a significant problem.

Operationalizations for this definitional component include a common belief that something should be done concerning the situation and use of a similar frame and terminology for the problem. Although public will is not simply public opinion, certain characteristics of public opinion are useful in assessing components of public will. The directionality of attitudes and beliefs constitutes one form of evidence that a condition has assumed “problem” status. This is particularly the case if survey respondents are being asked the extent to which a phenomenon is problematic—a common format for survey questions. If the issue area is clearly mapped against the left-right dimension, political ideology can be a more indirect means of assessing beliefs (see James and Fournelle 2000; Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009). An analyst may also look to the nature and volume of other expressions of concern about a situation, including public statements from social system leaders. Assessment of the second operationalization—use of a similar frame and terminology for the problem—might focus on convergence in statements and beliefs concerning the situation and its causes. Has a common frame of understanding for the

problem emerged? Is this understanding part of a broader narrative? How much variance does the analyst observe in the language used to define the situation?

Component 3: Resolve to Address the Situation

Shared recognition is not enough on its own to stimulate change; members of the social system also have to *resolve to address the situation*. This is the primary component distinguishing public will from public opinion. Documenting public support for change via passive responses to survey questions is fundamentally different from determining that a social system genuinely intends to engage in activities necessary to bring about change (Metropolitan Group 2009; Salmon, Post, and Christensen 2003). Resolve is a function of both a belief that the social system can do something concerning the situation and a willingness to commit significant resources to the cause. Beliefs of group members concerning “the performance capability of the social system as a whole” constitute “perceived collective efficacy” (Bandura 1997, 468-9). Perceived collective efficacy here concerns the extent to which social system members believe that they can generate sociopolitical change. Absent such a belief, the social system will lack the motivation necessary to effect change.

A willingness to commit significant resources to the cause is the second means of operationalizing resolve, with credible commitments to expend resources as potential instruments. An analyst can think about credibility in two ways. Capacity and capabilities (i.e., the existence of actual resources) are important considerations because the meaningfulness of public will often depends on the ability to mobilize resources. Sociopolitical change efforts, campaigns, and social movements require means such as financial and human capital and strong organizational structures to flourish (Leiderman, Wolf, and York 1997; Meyer 2004; Salmon, Fernandez, and Post 2010). Organizers draw on these resources initially to recruit and eventually to activate people and groups in efforts to garner support for a cause. A few individuals might serve as a catalyst for larger efforts, as was the case with an individual lighting himself on fire and spurring broader demonstrations during the Arab Spring; however, coordinated commitments involving a group of people are usually necessary to bring about significant sociopolitical change. Capacity and capabilities likely will also contribute to perceived collective efficacy. Preliminary expenditures—in the form of money or time, for example—constitute a related way of assessing credibility.

Yet another way of evaluating the willingness to commit significant resources is to consider the incentives and motivations of social system members. Individuals or groups may have reasons to be highly motivated or strong incentives to promote social change. Stakeholder analysis (see Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997), which examines relationship attributes like urgency of organizational members, is one way of evaluating incentives and motivations.

Additionally, as identified in the public opinion literature, the strength (i.e., extremity or intensity), salience (i.e., relevance or importance), and ideological consistency of attitudes and beliefs may provide signals concerning the psychological push behind a certain viewpoint.

Component 4: In a Particular Way

The fourth component mirrors the second, which dealt with shared recognition of a particular problem. Consequently, discussion here can be brief. Members of the social system have to share a view of the *particular way* to address the problematic situation (see Salmon, Fernandez, and Post 2010). Again, disparate views of the “solution” will prevent the emergence of a coherent and meaningful public will.

Operationally, social system members will use a similar frame and terminology with regard to the means of alleviating the problem. This shared solution (or “moral of the story” per NPF) may be part of a broader narrative concerning the problem. As with views of the problem, the directionality of attitudes and beliefs concerning the particular means of addressing the situation will be one manner of assessment. Since such views also frequently depend on common beliefs concerning root causes of the problem (see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Stone 2002), these views often will link directly to assessments of problem status (definitional component number 2). Concern with root causes also allows for the use of simplification devices like political ideology to organize and coordinate views. Convergence in statements and beliefs concerning the particular means of addressing the situation is another target for assessment. How much agreement is evident in the social system with regard to the proposed solution?

Component 5: Through Sustained Collective Action

The final component is a commitment to *sustained collective action* to address the problematic situation. The mere existence of an identifiable social system is evidence that some form of collective action is already taking place—even if limited to communicating about a common problem or goal. Again, the collective nature of the action matters because coordinated action is typically necessary to produce sociopolitical change.

Operationalization splits the ideas of commitment to collective action and intention to sustain such action. Assessment of the former might involve looking for evidence of group formalization, indicating that social system members are dedicated to acting in a coordinated way to boost their impact in achieving change. Paying dues to an organized group can signal a commitment to collective action, as can other forms of “identification” with the group (Cheney 1983). One target for assessing the intention to sustain collective activities is the stability over time of beliefs and attitudes related to the problem and its alleviation. Fleeting beliefs and attitudes would make sustenance of

collective action difficult. A second target is the level of publicity of commitments made by social system members. Widely publicized commitments carry with them reputational costs that make reversing position or abandoning the problem difficult. Formal organizations and public figures are especially subject to such pressures.

Ideally, social system members will sustain collective activities long enough to implement sociopolitical change effectively and meaningfully. When public policy is a necessary part of the change efforts, political authorities can more easily dismiss pressure from a social system if that pressure seems short lived or unsustainable. Further, the typical ebbing of attention paid to social problems described in the “issue-attention cycle” (Downs 1972) is a danger to effective change. Public will is more meaningful if the social system is sending strong signals that collective efforts will persist and will work to overcome future challenges.

A Tale of Two Publics: Firearm Control and Public Will

This brief case study looks primarily at public will and the issue of firearm control in the United States. The goals here are to provide a limited application of the definitional system, to demonstrate the concept’s deceptive complexity, and to show how this type of analysis adds to understanding of policy making and sociopolitical change. The firearm control issue is a hotly contested one with ongoing dimensions and is the type of high-profile and salient issue most likely to motivate policy makers (see Burstein 2006). That the issue has not reached a definitive resolution is important because discussing public will in an *ex post facto* manner can be problematic. However, this dynamic issue is also one for which national policy makers already have provided significant feedback in the form of failed major legislation, so analysis requires care. The analysis below demonstrates the simultaneous existence of different types of publics and shows that certain elements of a common media description of the issue are misleading. Careful application of the definitional system suggests at the time of this writing that only one of the two social systems exhibits strong public will at the national level, although the other social system is moving in the direction of a more meaningful public will.

The first definitional component of public will is existence of a *social system*. The National Rifle Association (NRA), a controversial and polarizing body, has led a social system opposing any new firearm control policies. The NRA is a strongly formalized, long-standing, and well-heeled organization that boasts a powerful lobbying arm and that communicates consistently with its dues-paying membership (see NRA 2013). Conversely, in the wake of a string of well-publicized shooting incidents, news media have often equated public will on the side favoring new firearm restrictions with simple public opinion. Such public opinion lacks the communicative cohesiveness of a social system. These incidents purportedly have served as focusing events and have

included the shooting of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords; the Aurora, CO, multiplex shooting; the Newtown, CT, elementary school shooting; and the Washington Navy Yard massacre. Pro-control organizations and coalitions existed prior to these incidents, including the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, and the International Action Network on Small Arms. However, these groups have lacked the information and monetary flows, coordination, and notoriety of the NRA's social system. Given the differences between the social systems and the potential role of public opinion, analysis of public will here provides a different perspective from what analysis of advocacy coalitions alone might supply.

Many view a broad swath of the general public as a pro-change social system. Following the focusing events, the news media and politicians have often cited the roughly 80-90 percent of Americans in national polls that favor specific new measures like expanded background checks for firearm purchases (see PollingReport.com 2013; Steinhauer 2013). The failure of the bipartisan Manchin-Toomey firearm control legislation to make it out of the U.S. Senate in April 2013 spurred claims of subverted public will, with one columnist going so far as to call the Senate the "slaughterhouse of public will" (Fineman 2013). According to Bennett (2013), the bill's cosponsors said of the NRA's influence in killing the legislation: "[t]his is an outrageous example of a special interest group thwarting the public will through campaign contributions and intimidation tactics." In sum, the *status quo* public² (i.e., the NRA-led public) has thus far battled a less established social system that seems to rely heavily on reports of public opinion.

The second component of public will is *shared recognition of a particular problem*. This is another area in which the NRA-led public has an advantage. The NRA's basic position is to oppose any firearm restrictions on the grounds of protecting Second Amendment rights—a view of the problem that is part of a long-standing and well-developed narrative communicated regularly to its millions of members. The pro-control public, by contrast, suffers from more fractured attitudes and beliefs, and a multitude of frames and terminologies that once again evidence a lack of consistent communication. Is the problem that firearms are everywhere, firearms are too easy to purchase, the mentally ill are able to gain access too easily, or certain types of firearms are available for purchase? The support for stricter laws on firearm sales also varies wildly across the states (Sides 2013). The volume of discussion on both sides certainly seemed to increase after the focusing events. However, the common media claim of a

² Established causal theories like veto players theory (see Tsebelis 2002) suggest that the *status quo* positioning of the NRA is important to the final outcome. However, bargaining situation is inconsequential to the definition of a social system. This is an example of an opportunity to use this definition of public will in conjunction with causal theories; in the end, bargaining position could explain the ineffectiveness of even a strong public will.

large bounce in public support for firearm control was questionable in that the polling numbers simply returned to 1990s or pre-Obama levels in some cases and showed only short-term movement (if any) even after the Newtown school shootings (see Pew Research Center 2013; PollingReport.com 2013; Rapoza 2013). In sum, then, the NRA-led public has had a much stronger shared recognition of a particular problem than has the pro-control public thus far.

The third component of public will is *resolve to address the situation*. Based on lobbying and other resources, the NRA-led public has rather strong perceived collective efficacy. The NRA boasts dues-paying membership into the millions (Kessler 2013), as well as millions of dollars spent on lobbying annually that has dwarfed lobbying money on the other side (OpenSecrets.org 2013). Both the NRA and President Obama have promised to keep fighting, but the intensity of beliefs has favored the NRA-led side (Vasilogambros 2013). Additionally, although Vice President Biden vowed that the American public would keep pushing for firearm control (Fram 2013), support for President Obama's favored initiatives had been slipping already in March 2013 (Enten 2013); furthermore, a national poll in late April showed only 19 percent of respondents were "angry" concerning the legislative failure in the U.S. Senate (*The New York Times* 2013), and a national poll in May showed 62 percent of Americans wanted the Senate to move on to other issues (Ekins 2013). In sum, certain national indicators suggested that the resolve of the pro-change public was flagging, while the NRA-led public exhibited strong perceived collective efficacy and made highly credible commitments to expend further resources.

The fourth component of public will is that the resolve is directed toward addressing the problem *in a particular way*. Following directly from the competing definitions of the problem, proposed restrictions on firearms have included expanded background checks (closing the gun show loophole, for instance), banning sales of assault weapons, limits on high-capacity ammunition clips, and limits on firearm purchases by the mentally ill. The separate proposals have drawn different levels of support (PollingReport.com 2013). Further, even some supporters have raised questions concerning the effectiveness of the specific proposed measures because handguns were responsible for 70-80 percent of firearm homicides from 1993 to 2011, and firearm-related homicides dropped by 39 percent over that same period (Planty and Truman 2013). While the pro-change public struggles with different ideas and messages for addressing the situation, the NRA's position of protecting Second Amendment rights is consistent and clear.

The final definitional component of public will is commitment to improving the problem with *sustained collective action*. The NRA's formal organization is not going away, and the attitudes and beliefs of its public are likely to remain stable. However, the pro-change public is also becoming more sophisticated and coordinated, mobilizing millions of supporters through social media and other online methods and benefitting from financial backing from heavyweights

like former-Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City (Pilkington 2013). The group Mayors Against Illegal Guns (2013), another important pro-change organization, currently boasts nearly 1,000 organizational coalition members. Pro-change publics are strengthening at the state level, as well. For example, a public that included the group Connecticut against Gun Violence and its coalition partners (CAGV 2013) contributed to the passage in Connecticut in April 2013 of the nation's strongest firearm laws (*USA Today* 2013). Pro-change publics at the state level are coalescing behind an interpretation of firearm control as a public health issue (see Record and Gostin 2013), which is a frame potentially bolstered by the end of the federal moratorium on firearm violence research (Kellermann and Rivara 2013). Clearly, then, certain pro-change publics are demonstrating a commitment to collective action and are also working on strengthening the other components of public will.

The firearm control issue in the United States has featured two rather different publics in terms of communication, cohesion, resolve, agreement, and other characteristics. Competition has been asymmetrical. The will of the NRA-led public has been more meaningful as it has involved shared views of problems and solutions within a cohesive social system with credible resolve to keep fighting. However, rather than simply blaming the situation on a lack of political responsiveness, the pro-control public is working on shoring up relevant capacities, beliefs, and commitments to sustained collective action to make its will more meaningful, as well.

Discussion and Conclusion

Development and social change researchers have utilized the idea of public will in examining the participation and voice of publics in recent years but have not fully engaged in the crucial step of formal definition. This project aims to make the widely used term "public will" a more analytically useful concept by providing an operational definition as well as instruments and targets for assessment. Researchers could usefully employ the conceptual tools provided here in conjunction with theories of the policy-making process such as the ACF, the NPF, and systems theory; importantly, the definitional system of public will is not a causal theory and is differentiable from such theories.

Compared with the ACF, the definition of public will allows for more flexible groups and recognizes that policy entrepreneurs can reconstruct or redefine coalitions in ways that go beyond expansion or contraction. The definition can help ACF researchers by giving insight into the role of public opinion and the role of resolve. As for the NPF, the concept of public will supplies a tool for further evaluating the targets and success of different narratives, as well as for thinking about how narratives contribute to the construction of future publics by shaping culture and institutions at the macro level. Finally, the definitional system allows

researchers to flesh out policy-making inputs like support and demands in systems theory and allows for greater examination of bidirectional flows in the system.

Other areas of inquiry can also benefit from this definitional system for public will. The system may allow communication scholars and researchers of social movements to better evaluate the success of both participatory and targeted approaches for social change. In political science, the ability to more accurately assess public will expands options for studying important phenomena like government accountability, political participation, and antiregime behaviors. For development economists, assessing public will fits well with newer emphases on crafting programs from local preferences and on marketing development programs more effectively to local populations (see e.g., Karlan and Appel 2011; World Bank 2013).

With definitional systems in place for both political will and public will, analysts might also explore interactions between the two more effectively. A number of theoretical approaches to the policy-making process do a good job of specifically addressing policy making within a set of governmental institutions, while a number of other approaches excel in describing and explaining mostly external pressures on policy makers. The parallel conceptual systems for political will and public will, with their common terminologies, potentially allow for a more direct interface of “external” and “internal” policy processes in ways that complement and provide new scientific tools for these other approaches.

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