Illustrator, American Icon, and Public Opinion Theorist: Norman Rockwell in Democracy

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This essay explores tensions over the portrayal of the public and public opinion during the mid-20th century, using common American images. Focus is on the extraordinarily popular pictures by Norman Rockwell, one of the most prolific artists of the 20th century, although one with ambitions far beyond simple illustration. I ask: Can we learn about public opinion from the commercial art market, and how might we go about using images as our data? How can we—as social and political historians so often do—use cultural artifacts to inform the historical study of public opinion?

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There was never a moment in our history when Americans agreed on the meaning, the value, or the role of public opinion in a democracy. From colonial times, through the founding period, through wars and depressions, and up to the present, we have—as a people—debated all aspects of the vox populi. That scholars and citizens alike debate such a thing is not so troubling, since the critique of our institutions and fundamental concepts—what they mean or what they should mean—is a vital ingredient in any lively, working democracy. On the other hand, struggles over public opinion also make American politics a very uncomfortable milieu: During moments when we cannot agree on how public opinion counts (e.g., the 2000 presidential election) or under what conditions it should count, we have difficulty tackling substantive policy questions at hand. And, lest we forget, other important notions in democratic theory are tied up with the overarching question of public opinion and its meaning. If the concept of public opinion is undefined or ill defined, so then are representation, leadership, and accountability.

Although we live in a world saturated with polls, there is little agreement about what public opinion actually is and when it matters, which is why surveys of public opinion—no matter how many, and how sophisticated—never quite seem to “settle” important policy quandaries and typically tend to complicate things further. But if we are to learn more about the flux in meaning of public opinion during any period, or

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across eras, and how that malleable idea is manifest in our political culture, we would do well to focus on the most critical moments in public opinion history. One of those is the mid-20th century (roughly from 1940 to 1960 for my purposes here), years during which Americans witnessed the birth and development of the modern opinion research industry. This was also, paradoxically, an era of great resistance to the aggregation of individual opinions, as a way to arrive at something called “public opinion.” This resistance took many forms, from vehement congressional opposition to the use of pre-election polls, to films portraying a public happy to live in ignorance about public affairs (Herbst, 1993). The present essay focuses on this period in an attempt to understand how cultural artifacts (mass produced illustrations for one) can tell us how the public might have viewed itself.

During the mid-20th century, many scholars recorded their own ideas about the nature and role of public opinion and projected them onto the populace as they wrote. We know well what intellectuals and statesmen thought about public opinion, how to conceptualize it, measure it, and determine its value. But we are still pretty much baffled about how citizens—the public in public opinion—thought about this key aspect of democratic process. Are there ways to understand what people, the mass voting (and nonvoting) public, believed about themselves as political beings? Here I use the art market, the intense commercial circulation of imagery, to understand public opinion about the people. What of the popular images people clung to, posted in their homes and offices, and thoroughly enjoyed? Do they tell us anything valuable about the nature of popular sentiment? Basing my arguments on popular texts, I posit that while surveyors busily built an industry grounded in the allegedly strong desire of citizens to provide thoughtful and rational opinions, the public to be surveyed was often attracted to a vision of itself as rather quiet and not particularly engaged in public affairs or debates raging around it. This is a central tension I believe existed in the vital mid-century period, and is still apparent in public discourse today, jumbled in various ways under journalistic and social scientific headings such as “political apathy” or “lack of efficacy” or “cynicism.”

Which brings us to Norman Rockwell, premier purveyor of mid-century American images and ideas. While leaders, public intellectuals, and scholars debated the volatility and malleability of public opinion during the 1940s and 1950s, arguing about how to involve a public which they believed sought a central place in the political fray, our most popular illustrator of America portrayed and spoke about a far different sort of public. Rockwell’s public may have been deeply rational, in the hopeful sense expressed by pollsters, but it also saw itself as tranquil and passive. We find such portraits of the public throughout popular culture of the period, in diverse movies like Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) or The Fountainhead (1949), two of many complicated mid-century films that featured publics activated only by elites, brought out of happy and ignorant slumber by propaganda and manipulation.

The tranquil public is portrayed best, however, by the most beloved American illustrator of this period, and perhaps of all time. We have vivid portraits of the public painted by journalists, public intellectuals, theorists, statesmen, and pollsters, but we have an equally compelling one—compelling to citizens themselves, it appears—in Rockwell.

**Rockwell and His Critics**

Rockwell has never achieved the status of artist in the eyes of most critics and art historians, despite some rather valiant recent attempts by prominent critics to raise his stature. He is typically labeled an illustrator, since his pictures were often created to
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accompany articles in magazines, to coincide with American holidays, and to decorate
doctor’s offices, schools, post offices, and other places Americans go about their busi-
ness. In this view, his work was technically proficient but without complexity, ambigu-
ity, or provocation—characteristics that we normally associate with imaginative and probing
artwork. Even with recent attempts to place Rockwell in the panoply of great American
artists, there is and will always be resistance to such categorization. Art critic Jed Perl,
writing in The New Republic, reacted to a recent, extraordinarily popular traveling retro-
spective of Rockwell’s work this way:

Like Martha [Stewart], Norman [Rockwell] understands that the audience,
far from regarding his hokum as the real anything, admires such work as the
supremely slick fakery that it is. No wonder Steven Spielberg is a Rockwell
collector. Rockwell’s world, with its pop-up verisimilitude and perfect day
before yesterday historical details, is fascinatingly manipulative. (Perl, 1999,
p. 42)

There is always with Rockwell much criticism and a kind of grudging admiration as
well, since his paintings so clearly struck a chord throughout the 20th century. Among
elite critics and journalists, there is some confusion about whether Rockwell has any
reality-oriented content or not. In a recent brief clip from the New York Times announc-
ing a Rockwell exhibition in Washington, D.C., the writer notes that the art “reflected a
sentimentalized America of small-town soda fountains, barbershops and mischievous
children” (p. B1). But even though this line implies that Rockwell’s world is a fantastical
one, the title of the article is “Mirror Images” (2000).

It is not my goal to save Rockwell from his many critics: I am agnostic on ques-
tions of aesthetic value or the place of Rockwell’s work—if any—in the American artis-
tic canon. I am interested instead in the America Rockwell illustrated, and more specifi-
cally in the view of public life and community one finds in his work. Some of these
issues have been tackled by art critics, but since his work is not considered as fine art,
there is surprisingly little cultural commentary on it. The sheer popularity of Rockwell’s
oeuvre, the fact that his images find their way into so many schoolrooms and public
buildings in America to this day, is enough to warrant the serious attention of scholars
—whether they like the pictures or not. Somehow Rockwell, in his chronic attempts to
pander to public tastes and ideas, managed to achieve a place in the history of visual
imagery that astounds: His prolific work spanned most of the 20th century and, during
those decades, created a resonance with the American mind that few other artists or
illustrators have achieved. Rockwell’s work may very well be the pinnacle of banality,
but it is distinctly American and ours alone.

And Rockwell did aim to please. One reason he is a fascinating subject of study is
that his work is intertwined with the rise of the mass media in 20th century America. No
artist, no matter how talented, can achieve the sort of popularity Rockwell did without
sponsorship. Rockwell’s came from the Saturday Evening Post, for which he produced a
startling 322 covers between 1916 and 1963. The Post was one of America’s most
popular magazines: In 1913 circulation was 2 million, rising to approximately 3 million
by 1937. Although today’s media market is far different and more segmented than was
the case in the early 20th century, these figures are much higher than our most popular
contemporary magazines (e.g., Cosmopolitan, TV Guide, or Good Housekeeping). And
the population of the United States was, in 1937 for example, just under 129 million.
Michael Kimmelman, writing about a Rockwell exhibit for the New York Times, notes:
You might say that the magazine [the *Saturday Evening Post*] was akin to what television became in terms of general appeal, and Rockwell quickly rose to be its premier draftsman. . . . In addition, he illustrated advertisements for Jell-O, Crest and a slew of other popular products. The *New Yorker* in 1945 estimated that Rockwell’s Boy Scout calendars were glanced at 1.6 billion (billion!) times each day. A couple of years before he died in 1978, at 84, 10,000 people turned out for a Rockwell parade . . . but it was nothing, in sheer numbers, compared with the 200,000 people a year who pass through the Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge (November 7, 1999).

Would Rockwell have garnered such great success and penetration of the national psyche had it not been for his longtime relationship with the *Post*? This is hard to know, but suffice it to say that few artists or illustrators had such a prominent showcase for their works. The *Post* and Rockwell worked together: He sought and reveled in the wide distribution of his images, and the *Post* found that Rockwell’s work fit their notions of America and Americans. In his autobiography, Rockwell underscored his personal and professional need to be liked by the mass public: He often became depressed and aggraved with commercial failures, for example (Rockwell did a substantial amount of work for the advertising industry, especially in the early days of his career). He was a sophisticated man, and never believed his pictures to be exacting reflections of the empirical world. Instead, they were based in some reality, but intent on capturing a fantasy of 20th century American life:

The view of life I communicate in my pictures excludes the sordid and the ugly. I paint life as I would like it to be. . . . I sometimes think we paint to fulfill ourselves and our lives, to supply the things we want and don’t have. . . . Maybe as I grew up and found that the world wasn’t the perfectly pleasant place I had thought it to be I unconsciously decided that even if it wasn’t an ideal world, it should be and so painted only the ideal aspects of it. . . . (Rockwell, 1960, p. 44)

Rockwell’s fame was ensured by the *Post*, and he was viewed with great respect as a master illustrator by a generation of such artists. But he was, as art critic Steven Heller points out, a victim of new media technology as well as a beneficiary. With the rise of color photography, illustration work became increasingly superfluous to magazine publishing, and the need for exacting realism like Rockwell’s diminished. Beyond photography, though, Rockwell was a foil in the postwar years for many younger artists who were drawn to the European styles of cubism, surrealism, and the like. He was, throughout most of his life, engaged in a struggle to be taken seriously by the artistic community. No matter how popular his art became with the public, he could not win the favor of critics during his lifetime, and he wanted the admiration of both audiences (Heller, 1999).

Are There Really Politics in Rockwell?

Rockwell did produce a series of explicitly political civil rights paintings during the 1960s (e.g., *The Problem We All Live With*, 1964), but his oeuvre during our period of interest—the 1940s and 1950s—seems on its face almost entirely apolitical. There are boy scouts helping troubled people, firemen and workers, children at play, soldiers
coming home from war, and mothers toiling busily in tidy kitchens. Many of these pictures are indeed bereft of obviously political content, although riddled with subtexts about race, gender, class, and ethnicity. But many others, as we shall see, either implicitly or explicitly address the nature of politics and citizenship in America, making arguments about public behavior, democratic values, and community life. His vision (or version) of American community life, of war, and of citizenship may not be everyone’s vision, but it resonated strongly with a tremendous number of Americans, which is why Rockwell’s pictures are all around us, trumping other art that might hang in our local public offices. As evolving theorist of public opinion, Rockwell somehow stumbled upon one of the most important themes in the democratic theory literature, namely the complex and emotionally fraught linkages among local association, conversation, and politics.

Political leaders, scholars, and social critics have long scrutinized and debated the relationship between community and politics, and these works are fortunately well-known and highly instructive. The ancient Greek philosophers were eloquent on the subject, explicating how community membership and policy-making are intertwined. Aristotle was most focused on these connections, particularly in *The Politics* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*, where he defines friendship, explores the meaning of citizenship, and reflects on how both are related to the nature of the state itself. In *The Ethics*, for example, he argues:

> It is clear then that a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. These are conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is a community of families and aggregations of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. . . . Hence arise in cities family connexions [sic], brotherhoods, common sacrifices, amusements which draw men together. But these are created by friendship, for the will to live together is friendship. *The end of the state is the good life, and these are the means towards it.* [italics added.]

(Aristotle, 1941, pp. 1188–1189)

Here Aristotle underscores the importance of shared place in characterizing an aggregation of people as a community. Sharing space (geographic in Aristotle’s day, geographic or electronic in our own) is necessary but not sufficient when it comes to locating or building a state. Family units, friendships, and kinship networks are foundational elements of the state as well: They are the “means to the good life,” and the state can, in the end, enhance and protect the good life.

Far beyond antiquity, in American politics, the most compelling writer to link community and politics is of course Alexis de Tocqueville, who documented the relationships among social life, associations, and politics during his early 19th century travels through the United States. It was clear to him that social ties undergirded the state, and so he wrote in his masterpiece, *Democracy in America*, that “when citizens have the faculty and habit of associating for everything, they will freely associate for little purposes as well as great” (Tocqueville, 1969, p. 523). For Tocqueville, community and association were the essence of democracy itself as practiced in America, and he saw both the power and danger in these relations. Associations, clubs, town meetings, and other forms of interpersonal interaction in localities give democracy its strength, but can lead to conformity and the silencing of minorities. And nearly 200 years later, scholars still fret about the nature of community—whether it is weak or strong and how
community ties can both enhance and crush the development of citizenship. It seemed that Rockwell pondered this as well, perhaps unknowingly following Tocqueville quite closely, painting (incessantly) associations “for little purposes as well as great.”

So many political theorists, from such different periods, have explicated the links among community, friendship, associations, and political activity. But one of the more elaborate and powerful arguments was made by Rogers Smith in his recent work on the multiple traditions and visions of citizenship in America. Smith explores how a variety of racist and nativist paradigms have influenced the creation of citizenship laws and the very structure of our institutions. His inspiration for the book is normative, recognizing that a nation of citizens can only act collectively—become engaged in politics and argument about the future—if their leaders and institutions persuade them that they are a nation. Community feeling and politics are linked strategically for politicians who need to mobilize voters, but there is a moral and spiritual side as well. Smith argues:

Because the imperative to constitute a people that feels itself to be a people is politically necessary, it is also a weighty though certainly not absolute moral imperative. It is, after all, undeniable that the interests of all people in belonging to viable and valued political communities are enormous.... And most people cannot be happy unless they live in a political society that they regard as in some sense worthy in itself as well as supportive of their identities and interests as they understand them. (Smith, 1997, p. 474)

It is in illustrating and, by so doing, promoting this spiritual side of community that Rockwell performs so stunningly well. Smith’s remarks link some of the traditional concerns of political philosophers with Rockwell: Good feeling about the community one lives in is inherently tethered to political identity and, ultimately, to thoughtfulness and critical loyalty to the state. What many critics find most annoying in Rockwell—his determination to generate a simple-minded “feel good” sentiment among audiences—had the intended resonance, it seems, if the popularity of his images is any indicator of success.

Rockwell’s art is admittedly replete with offensive cultural politics (e.g., portrayals of gender, race, class, ethnicity) which I address only in passing, since these problems are so glaringly obvious. But it is also replete with imagery of community, and that is where its political nature resides. There are explicitly political pictures—the “Four Freedoms” (painted during 1942) as well as election-oriented and wartime images—but let me first turn to Rockwell’s more purely associational work.

**Community Meets Politics in Rockwell**

If one agrees with democratic theorists who argue that community, friendship, and politics are intertwined, a close look at images and ideas about community in Rockwell is revealing. Rockwell’s public is a placid one, rooted in interpersonal dialogue and unified. And that, to my mind, is one dominant mid-20th century ideal of the public, lost a bit with the active, conflictual, and politicized public often portrayed by pollsters, who sincerely wanted to record real, solid opinion. Mid-century sociologists, by contrast, were more likely to underscore placidity, cross-pressures, and, at times, blissful ignorance.

Most of Rockwell’s pictures—the Post covers, his portraits of great Americans (he painted several presidents), and his more ambitious social issues paintings during the civil rights era—depict individuals or people in small groups. Often the dyads are
husband and wife or parent and child, and the small groups are families. But there are many pictures that portray tiny groups of people who are related not by blood and marriage but by sharing a community. Two well-known pictures in this genre are War News from 1945 (Figure 1) and Shuffleton’s Barbershop, a 1950 painting turned Post cover (Figure 2). Both paintings are fine representations of Rockwell’s work, and both were painted during the height of his long-running popularity.11

In War News, three diners and the counterman of a restaurant listen intently to a radio for news from abroad. We’ve a sense, as with most Rockwell pictures, that these men are more than acquaintances—that they are “regulars” at this lunch counter and likely come often to eat and talk with each other and the counterman, presumably the owner. They are too old to fight; they are the homefront. The orientation of the bodies is toward the radio, and it’s a sensible orientation: Mass media, in times of war, are vital sources of data, and people cling to whatever news they hear or read. When it comes to mass communication processes, war news is in a category of its own, since the magnitude of the events and the amount of information one has are so entirely mismatched. Rockwell realizes this, and so positions the men toward the radio and not each other. The counterman works, cleaning plates, while listening to the faceless voice. Interestingly, it is an intimate portrait; the radio is not just an appliance but a personal force in this conversation. The scene reinforces the view of so many scholars who have

![Figure 1. War News.](image-url)
commented upon the intimacy of radio, the way it—more than any other mass medium—feels like a companion, always entertaining and always familiar in a somewhat mysterious way.\textsuperscript{12}

Most research and writing about the radio and its place in 20th-century history emphasize the way that radio came into the home and affected the leisure time and organization of the American family. Unlike early American newspapers, which were first read in coffeehouses and taverns (because of the illiteracy of many but also the high cost of subscription), radio entered American cultural life through the household. Radios existed in public places like diners, of course, but the radio took its most prominent position in the living room, where the family could gather around. By 1945, when Rockwell painted, radio was thoroughly integrated into American life, of course, and reliance upon it was great. It is interesting how Rockwell puts the radio in semi-public space and portrays it as the central voice in a group setting. Here radio leads, serving as a springboard for dialogue. And that is what Gabriel Tarde, the French sociologist, observed about mass media in his essays on media and conversation at the end of the 19th century. Tarde noted that one need not even heed the media oneself to be affected by it: “Not that everyone need read the newspapers but even those who fail to are forced to

\textbf{Figure 2. Shuffleton’s Barbershop.}
follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts. One pen suffices to set off a million tongues.”

As in many Rockwell pictures, characters share the same proximate physical space, drawing near to each other even when it’s not quite necessary. In *War News*, patrons of the diner could be spread out along the counter and probably hear the radio just fine. But Rockwell pushes them close, arguing pictorially that community, conversation, and bodily contact go together somehow. These notions of human proximity have been a chronic point of debate among political theorists, who have wrestled with the relationship between the size of a community (in terms of population, density, and geographic area) and its democratic potential since classical times. Must democracy be small in order to work best, or can large communities be real democracies, even when most citizens never have contact with each other or meet in the same halls and clubs? We continue this debate today, an age when Internet dialogue and exchanges are valued by millions as among their most intense and meaningful social connections, but during the 1940s and 1950s, the primary means for discussion about public affairs or anything else was in person.

Rockwell had few alternatives when painting political dialogue or discussion: There was the town meeting and the dyad or small group. And in some ways, we still believe that it is in small face-to-face settings that people really come to know each other’s preferences and deliberate. This is why presidential candidates, no matter how much money they spend on political advertising or how much time they spend talking to journalists, feel they must visit coffeeshops and bars, or hold town meetings with “real people” (and have these moments captured by the media for national broadcast). Rockwell was very sure of in-person contact as the best medium for political discussion, and perhaps this is one of the many aspects of his work that seems outmoded or foreign to us in an age where so many choices of communication media exist.

Shuffleton’s Barbershop is a romanticized portrait of small town life; we are certain from the style of the window panes and Franklin stove to be in a town commercial building and not a store front in an urban setting. It is evening and the shop is closed, but the owner and friends remain, making music together in a back room. The store has a crowded interior, full of the barbers’ equipment, the stove, brooms, and magazines for customers to read. But the real action is in the background of the painting, in leisure time—outside the time and space of obligation and inside the time and space for pleasure and avocation. We can see only three men, but get a sense that a few more are either playing instruments or listening. We peer through the window, spying on this scene of friendship and native amateur artistic endeavor, getting the sense that the scene is a regular one. The barber shop is not so much a performance stage, but a place to enact friendship and its pleasures. As in the diner of *War News*, these are older Americans, so often painted by Rockwell as foundational to community life.

The painting is interesting from the perspective of community and politics for several reasons, and resonant with *War News* and the sort of placid picture of the American public Rockwell painted throughout his career. For one, the picture depicts and celebrates the close relation, not the dichotomy, of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*: The barbershop is—as they often are in small American communities—a commercial space but also a space for social exchange and shared time with friends. In fact, the painting is an argument for such a fusion, since it underscores how naturally commerce and recreation go together. But more than recreation, making music is self-expression of a very special sort, and that such important work can happen in a setting for haircuts is Rockwell’s point here. It was also Aristotle’s point: Friendship and the business of civil society are
intertwined and are in fact the basis for the state. That people move in and out of public space, for commercial purposes and personal ones, is an ideal-typical aspect of democratic society but also a rather fundamental one.

By 1950, when this painting was made and appeared on the cover of the *Post*, the active turmoil of war had passed and Americans had moved on from obsession with foreign entanglements to a focus on the home front. The barbershop is a public space by day, it is true, but a private one at night, and very much emphasizes the turning inward and growing emphasis on interior life that would characterize the post–Cold War period in the United States. For Rockwell, the public had always been placid: He made no pictures of serious strife or conflict among citizens until the civil rights paintings of the 1960s, and those images never really attained resonance in American consciousness in any case. We do not see them today in public places, for example, or reproduced in magazines or advertisements. And when one visits the Internet to buy Rockwell prints and paraphernalia, or simply to view his work, these paintings are not prominent.

Important from a public opinion standpoint is the emphasis on interpersonal communication, but not in the form of sharing political views as in *War News*. In the barbershop, exchange between friends is a deeper sort of connection with no explicitly political function. Yet, as noted above, personal connection and friendship are fundamental aspects of community and of the state, something pervasive in Rockwell’s work, so barbershop interactions are in their way as vital to democracy as political rallies or campaign events. In both pictures here, participants are male, but community is not as a rule gendered male in Rockwell. Women are, as we shall see below, sometimes portrayed in political situations and occasionally as sociopolitical heroes (e.g., Rockwell’s famous painting of Rosie the Riveter, published in 1943). For all of the problematic gender politics in Rockwell, which I leave to scholars of gender, there is some equity in his work, at least when it comes to participation in community.

The central point about both of these Rockwell images is that they celebrate the small group as locus for community and for discussion. In *War News*, we are certain that distinctly political discussion will occur after the broadcast is over, and in *Shuffleton’s Barbershop*, we see that the structure of community is there even if music and not politics is the orientation of the moment. When these pictures were painted, during the 1940s and 1950s, Americans had a lot to talk about. Practically every dimension of American life had been altered by the war, and people needed to make sense of their lives with the drama of the war coming to an end or already behind them. So it is natural that conversation—conversation very closely tethered to community structure—looms large in Rockwell. He captures, perhaps better than any 20th century artist or illustrator, that uniquely American configuration of community, friendship, and politics that Tocqueville described. There were painters and illustrators of the past who used political conversation as their subjects (e.g., George Caleb Bingham’s paintings of 19th-century political canvassing or Thomas Nast’s cartoons), but Rockwell stands alone in his ability to draw friendship and the business of state together in the manner Aristotle laid out. It is a kind of politics, a public sphere perhaps, although not exactly full of debate or the sort of productive conflict democratic theorists (and others, like Habermas) hope for. Rockwell’s people, while sometimes listening to the radio or reading, for example, are typically not portrayed attending political gatherings or ingesting newspaper content (cf. *Freedom From Fear*). They appear content but uninformed, and it is a public without passion for much else but itself, its comforts, and its everyday amusements.
People, Talk, and Institutions

Rockwell was attracted to the composite picture, as a way to tell a long story. Widely known is, for example, the 1952 picture *Day in the Life of a Girl*, in which we follow a pre-adolescent girl from morning until night, watching her swim, bike, primp, get kissed by a boy, write intensely in her diary, and finally fall asleep. Reproduced here (see Figure 3) is *The Gossips*, a Post cover from 1948 depicting a variety of men and women relaying gossip from one person to the next. This group of middle-aged and older people spread the word, somehow implicating or embarrassing a man they know, who himself confronts the initiator of the gossip in the last scene. Unlike the small groups gathering in the diner or in the barbershop, this group forms a human communication chain, portraying a public made up not of small groups talking but of an aggregate with a common interest and close ties (he made another picture in 1929 also called *The Gossips*, where three women sit very close and talk). They are racially homogeneous and not far apart in age, but they are nonetheless a mixed public of sorts united by a common interest and not just by physical proximity. Gossip seemed to be of great interest for Rockwell, in fact, as if it were synonymous with community itself. Communication defines a locality for him and indeed seems to be the lifeblood of the imaginary small
town he most often painted. This pervasive portrayal of communication, a public that talks and where people know each other, is undoubtedly one of the things that made Rockwell’s images so attractive.

Among Rockwell’s best known pictures are those of people—particularly children—portrayed in the midst of interactions with institutions or with representatives of institutions. Rockwell was, for many years, a chief illustrator for Boy’s Life magazine, and so there are many pictures of scouts in action, helping those in distress or pursuing outdoor adventure. But there are two outstanding pictures in this genre I will call “person-meets-institution” images: Doctor and Doll, a 1929 Post cover, and the 1958 cover The Runaway (see Figure 4). In both pictures, a child comes in contact with a friendly spokesman for an institution, the medical professional and the police, respectively. Rockwell, as I have argued above, was particularly inclined toward the fusion of public and private life, painting a large number of pictures that blended the two in celebratory fashion. Here we see the same fusion, where a physician stays in character and represents medicine (he holds his stethoscope against a girl’s “sick” doll), but takes on a playful, parental role to entertain a small child. Similarly, the policeman goes along with a boy’s plans to leave town while the counterman looks on in amusement. These pictures were engaging
when they appeared and still give us pleasure, since they conjure up a world where institutions are welcoming, good humored, and have time to spare. Both institutions—medicine and police work—were extraordinarily different during the periods these pictures were painted than they now are, but Rockwell of course exaggerated the friendly side of his contemporaries in these professions. Part of Rockwell’s hopefulness, something vital to the imaginative reconstruction of American life audiences were drawn to, was centered in a belief in local institutions. He focused not on their contributions to the economy, but on the way they buttressed the family, the community, and the desire for (and enjoyment of) talk. Institutions in Rockwell do the work of the state directly (the policeman) and in a kindly way, but also do the work of the state indirectly by serving as the glue between private life and public life.18

Voters, Candidates, and Elections

Rockwell’s pictures of people in community are by their nature political in the senses outlined above, but he also produced a number of works portraying American elections and political institutions. In 1943 he was asked by the Post editors to spend time at the White House to capture the internal scene and, in particular, the diversity of people lined up outside the Oval Office to see the president—journalists, foreign dignitaries, and even Miss America. After this series of pictures was published in the magazine, Rockwell painted several portraits of presidents and presidential candidates, from Eisenhower and Stevenson to the Kennedys and Ronald Reagan. This set of pictures, as Christopher Finch points out in Norman Rockwell’s America, is a departure for Rockwell, who was generally more interested in common citizens than those with great authority or power (1975, p. 179). Nonetheless, Rockwell enjoyed this work immensely and the waiting room sketches are amusing, giving the reader some sense of the president’s long day.

Closely related to public opinion and citizenship, however, are Rockwell’s election oriented pictures, like Election Day (see Figure 5), a Post cover from October of 1948, or another cover from November of 1944 titled Undecided. With only a few exceptions, Rockwell did not paint explicitly political scenes—scenes about the electoral process or town meetings—until an election was imminent. The Post was a magazine hinged to national current events, so around election time the editors needed covers that acknowledged the campaign and upcoming vote, and Rockwell provided these.

Election Day is vintage Rockwell, portraying the contemporary 1948 domestic scene: a family at home in the kitchen, replete with small child, teddy bear, and dog. What is interesting about the picture, though, is that it depicts political argument or conflict in such a bald fashion, something Rockwell rarely did until the 1960s civil rights paintings. Husband and wife clearly differ on who should be elected president, and it looks as though the disagreement is fierce (though comical to us), so much so that the couple’s son is ignored during the debate. In some ways, the picture sits in contrast to Rockwell’s other more pleasant paintings of family and community. But Rockwell did recognize that in a democracy disagreement happens and is a generally good thing (we see this also in The Holdout, from 1959, which captures a tense moment in a jury’s deliberation). Rockwell’s world, and our world to some extent, is generally one where argument takes place but typically in controlled and safe environments. The kitchen is safe: The couple in Election Day will, we seem assured, get past the 1948 election and carry on with their domestic life, and the jurors will go back to their daily routines.

Although an entire book can (and indeed should) be devoted to the subject of gender in Rockwell, the gender politics of this painting—among the few Rockwell pictures
focused on political discussion—are glaring. In *Election Day*, we see not so much a free and frank exchange of views as the intimidation of a wife by her husband. Perhaps she had just berated him, with equal fervor, about his intention to vote for Dewey. We can’t know. We sense she will go on and vote for Truman regardless, and that is a bit unusual and gutsy for Rockwell’s typically accommodating, agreeable women. Girls in Rockwell do at times smack or beat up boys (implied best perhaps in *Shiner*, 1953), but these are isolated incidents as women tend to be preening, missing their soldier boyfriends, and running the domestic machinery. In *The Holdout*, the sole female juror both has a strong opinion (as the wife in *Election Day* does) and holds her own against a male majority. We can see that her fellow jurors are employing a variety of strategies trying
to persuade her: stern words, understanding pleas, and logical argumentation. These are ineffective at the moment, but the word “holdout” in the title of the painting implies that a group consensus will be reached eventually—that one woman’s contrary opinion is a temporary and amusing phase in the deliberation nearing conclusion. But at least she presumably articulated her reasons to the jury and made her point.

One might argue that Rockwell is one of the earliest observers of American culture and politics to seize upon what we now call the “gender gap.” Gender difference is a cultural phenomenon that Rockwell played with throughout his lengthy career, often setting up the sexes to do battle (e.g., girl vs. boy swimming pool fight in *Day in the Life of a Girl*, 1952). These arguments and fights tend to be good-humored and end happily (the boy and girl in *Day in the Life* kiss in a subsequent frame), but Rockwell is at least conscious of a social abyss, even if vaguely conceived in his mind.19

And there are other election pictures, oriented around local campaigns, including one *Post* cover from 1958 titled *Elect Casey*, which depicts an exhausted candidate for office who has just heard the crushing news of his landslide loss to an opponent. Citizenship is most often portrayed through the general community pictures and wartime paintings, but civic responsibility is also a matter of voting and campaign work. Very important to observe in Rockwell is that, and this is one place he departs from the more Tocquevillian view of civic life, politics is a sport of individuals in community but not quite of parties or groups. In all of the paintings discussed in this section, the citizen—voter or candidate or president—acts in that role alone, arguing with others or, as in *Undecided* (1944), shown in isolation to cast a vote. It is odd in some ways that parties are not depicted in Rockwell’s pictures, since they are a staple of American political illustration and art, and until the last few decades, were one of the most vibrant sorts of local, community association in the United States. Despite the general community orientation of Rockwell, however, and the fact that he often showed people socializing or working in small groups, he chose not to show them coming together for the express purpose of politics. In electoral politics, people seem to act by themselves (e.g., *Freedom of Speech*) and not collectively. It is one of many strains that makes Rockwell’s work at base conservative: Acting together as a community was fine for Rockwell, as long as people were not agitating in a strike or at a political rally. Until the 1960s, in fact, Rockwell wanted to define political participation as something one does within the formal channels provided by the state: campaigns, elections, and town meetings. This is the kind of political behavior he felt most comfortable with, and indeed a public that is placid and generally content with the status quo is happy with its predetermined structures for political expression.

**Soldiers and the “Four Freedoms”**

During and after both the first and second world wars, Rockwell painted soldiers. They were not portrayed in battlefield action, but instead were typically drawn in relation to the home front: Women in Rockwell hold close or sleep next to photographs of men in uniform; soldiers share a laugh, or visit their families. It is hard to critique the wartime pictures of soldiers: They are after all men who volunteered or were drafted to fight in life-threatening combat, and so they were all in their own ways heroic. But while the soldiers in Rockwell represent wars overseas, they seem oddly untouched by war and go about the tasks any young man might when at home—sharing good times with people in their age group, helping their mothers, studying books. And their families seem untouched by war as well, as if life were normal. Things were somewhat more complicated
than this, of course, as historian Michael Sherry notes. Many soldiers were resentful of the prosperity they found on trips home, seeing well-fed and happy people often indifferent to the suffering of soldiers. We know that Rockwell’s world differs from the empirical one in a myriad of ways. But what is important is that his pictures represent the kind of war and the sort of soldiers we and our leading institutions—the government, the press—wanted to have. Many civilians, public officials, and vets alike knew war was hell, but a placid public goes to war without question or real trauma, and this is the public of Rockwell’s world. There was always debate about both wars, on the fringes of society and also in the mainstream, but one only celebrates that sort of deliberation when one believes the public to be lively and contentious. Rockwell’s people may have had strong opinions about it (perhaps there was heated debate after the radio broadcast in War News?), but we can’t be sure. Fierce political debate and expression were exceptional in Rockwell, not at all common, hence the intriguing strangeness of the Election Day husband and wife among his characters.

Rockwell served in the First World War and wanted to help in the Second, so as is well known, he painted the “Four Freedoms” series—among his most resonant and long-lasting images—in order to illustrate President Roosevelt’s rhetoric and make his own powerful contribution to the war effort. Rockwell had, according to his autobiography, come up with the idea for painting the pictures early one morning in 1942, rushed to make sketches over the next few days, and with a friend hurried to Washington to offer the art to various government offices to use in their publications. These bureaucrats dismissed the sketches for a variety of reasons—general disinterest in poster art or desire for “real” fine art. So Rockwell left Washington deeply discouraged, but stopped off at the Post offices in Philadelphia on his way home. Ben Hibbs, an editor at the Post, thought the pictures extraordinary and agreed to publish them when they were complete. The “Four Freedoms” appeared in 1943 inside the magazine, with essays by famous writers accompanying each. They were enormously popular: The Post received much acclaim for the pictures, and Hibbs noted that reprint requests came pouring in. He also wrote Rockwell that the Treasury Department sent the paintings on tour and that they “were viewed by 1,222,000 people in 16 leading cities and were instrumental in selling $132,992,539 worth of [war] bonds.” The reproductions appeared in public places throughout the country, as they still often do some 60 years later.

The “Four Freedoms” had great resonance with the public; that is clear. In the most insightful essay about Rockwell we have, an essay that should be required reading on both Rockwell and popular art, historian Robert Westbrook argues that some of the pictures engaged the public because the images argued that the war—its purpose and necessity—was rooted in obligation to the American family. All four pictures, he posits, were consonant with the larger rhetorical strategy of the state:

Americans were fighting World War II to protect essentially private interests and discharge essentially private obligations. And, in two of the four paintings, the message was that the people of the United States were fighting for the family. (Westbrook, 1993, p. 203)

It is indeed the case that the pictures tie support of the war to the home front, and even more precisely, the home. But there are other interesting aspects of them as well, from the standpoint of public opinion theory and my argument about the placid public in Rockwell. Freedom from Want (the Thanksgiving scene) and Freedom to Worship are less interesting than are Freedom from Fear (see Figure 6) and Freedom of Speech.
Freedom from Fear portrays an American mother and father putting their small children to bed, while the war rages in Europe. Although very popular, this picture is often criticized for its smugness: Americans could worry about the war (bombings, as noted in the father’s newspaper), but these events were far away and so the concern was more remote than immediate. Maybe Rockwell was at fault choosing to portray the comfort associated with the distance Americans had from the war’s most life-threatening events. For Rockwell here, as in all of his politically oriented pictures, the threat to Americans is from other nations: The American government is mostly unmentioned but when it is (as embodied through institutions such as the police or the president), the state is benign and paternal, worthy of the public trust. The war was indeed a “good war,” a war that most Americans believed was a struggle against external, evil forces. And this subject was also
very appealing to Rockwell—his type of easily understood conflict—because it celebrated
the American way, American culture and life as we know it.

From the standpoint of public opinion, *Freedom from Fear* is interesting because
the media again play a central role, as they do in *War News* discussed above. The
newspaper is an intrusion of the exterior world into a most intimate scene, but it is, as
radio was in *War News*, a quasi-family member whose contents can change our lives
and our attitudes while also providing comfort. In fact, the ability to comfort and reas-
sure, through authoritative coverage of events and the provision of necessary informa-
tion, has always been a function of the American mass media. Unlike *War News*, how-
ever, there is no implication at all that the newspaper will spur discussion or friendly
conversation. Instead, the paper seems to make the family want to hunker down, in bed,
which is the safest of places, and avoid confrontation or discussion about the scary
events of the outside world. The war intrudes on family life here, but only in a vaguely
threatening way, and not in a way that demands action or inspiration. The painting is
one of the best representatives of the placid public in Rockwell, since this conception
of the public is one that paints Americans as agitated, of course, but fundamentally
docile, self-absorbed, and sleepy.

*Freedom of Speech* is another commonly reproduced Rockwell painting, still seen
today throughout the country in schools, public buildings, and family restaurants. A
working man is portrayed speaking his mind at a town meeting. The painting—another
version of which is called *Town Meeting* and depicts more of the crowd—is indeed
iconic in American visual imagery, as Maureen Hart Hennessey argues. But iconic in
what way? It underscores the value Americans place on speaking one’s mind, for we get
the sense that this lone man (based on a person Rockwell knew) disagrees with the
majority opinion at this meeting. It also celebrates the opinion of the common man, as
George Gallup did so eloquently in his *Pulse of Democracy*, for this is a working man,
without a tie and with the dirty fingernails of manual labor. He not only speaks his mind
but has come prepared, having read the town annual report which protrudes out of his
jacket pocket. The picture is plausible although aesthetically troubling, since he looks
up a bit too far (toward heaven?): It is hard to imagine that, even if a person or a
committee stands on a stage at the front of the room, he is looking directly at them. But
this is Rockwell’s style. He no doubt liked the notion of his model looking not to
authority of humans (the town council) but instead to the authority of God, who might
take his side in this dispute.

The painting is typical of Rockwell also for its focus on the individual, and not the
organized political group. We do not see people working in committee, but a lone man
who thinks and acts by himself. As we saw above, Rockwell sometimes portrayed people
in conversation: The *War News* crowd will talk after the radio report and the jury of *The
Holdout* is mid-argument. But when it comes to important policy debates, men—even
enmeshed in community—must act by themselves against the majority, or so the picture
implies. The faces who surround this man (again, more fully depicted in the *Town Meet-
ing* version of the same scene) are respectful and listen intently, believing that even a
working man has the right to a forceful opinion. Does the painting fly in the face of my
argument about the placid public in Rockwell? Not quite, since it is a pleasant scene and
a well-behaved public that knows how to take turns in political speech-making. After
the man says his piece and sits back down, his opinion will be registered in a polite
way, whether it changes people’s minds or not. Citizens talk in Rockwell, quite a lot in
fact, but they never get too riled up.

Despite the presidential portraits he made, and his trip to the White House for the
Post in 1943, Rockwell’s politics happen at the local level. He chose the family as the local institution for so many pictures, and for Freedom of Speech, he wants to stay local as well. This comports with his general emphasis on community and friendship as the basis for all human activity; it probably never occurred to Rockwell to illustrate Roosevelt’s point about freedom of speech by showing a man walking to the state capitol or confronting a congressman. Speech is always bound to familiar surroundings: Rockwell’s characters don’t want to venture out to talk politics with strangers. Indeed, that would seem inappropriate to them. The media bring news to them, but we sense that their opinions are not quite channeled back to those media—newspaper or broadcast. In the American world Rockwell painted, information flows into a community but then just stays there, to be chewed over a bit at the lunch counter, in the kitchen, or after the town meeting.

Ideology, Rockwell, and Opinion Research

The critiques of Rockwell are well known, and there are two—one aesthetic/narrative and one ideological—that are most common. On the artistic side, the most compelling charge is his inability to leave much up to the audience’s imagination, underscoring the points he wants to make and not allowing much room for interpretation or mystery. He was a creative storyteller, although oppressively controlling. And on the ideological side, many point to the omissions in Rockwell: America is a fine and fair place with no conflict and universally happy adults and children. Until the civil rights paintings, there is little focus on class conflict, on poverty, racism, and other chronic American problems.

But to use the work of Rockwell, whose images are better known than any other American artist, as an artifact of public opinion, we need to dig deeper into the question of ideology. How, exactly, does Rockwell work as ideology, and why is its ideological message so bothersome to critics? Most directly related to my general inquiry: What does the ideological subtext of Rockwell—and its attractions—reveal about the undercurrents of American public sentiments? I am interested here not in public opinion about policy, since policy debate changes from year to year, but in more basic undergirdings in popular American thought—what historian Robert Westbrook in his fine work on Rockwell calls “popular political theory.” These are ideas about social life and political practice held by ordinary people and evident in our art, institutions, media, and other cultural products and structures.

For my purposes here, a useful meaning of ideology comes from sociologist Alvin Gouldner, who writes:

Ideologies . . . are belief-systems distinguished by the centrality of their concern for What Is and by their world-referencing “reports.” Ideologies are essentially public doctrines offering publicly scrutinizable evidence and reasoning on their behalf; they are never offered as secret doctrines . . . ideologies differ also from “propaganda” which is not believed in—at least at first—by those spreading it. Ideologies are intended to be believed in by those affirming them publicly and by all men, because they are “true,” and they thus have a universal character. (Gouldner, 1976; p. 33)

This meaning of ideology is helpful in the case of Rockwell’s art, its appeal and its salience in the panoply of images about America that survive. Rockwell focuses on
“what is”—the texture of everyday life in community and what that looks like. And while Rockwell realized his images were positive and not necessarily representative of every aspect of life, they are meant to capture at least some of the essence of everyday experience. But most important, and mysterious in some ways, is that Rockwell’s work does seem to have a kind of “truth” for its consumers: The pictures are about hope but also about relationships we know and feelings we do indeed have toward neighbors, children, or local institutions. For these reasons, Rockwell’s work is engaging and deeply ideological: It tries to speak to the experience of everyone even if it fails miserably, demographically, by refusing to portray, in any sustained way, ethnic minorities or the deeply impoverished faces of the Depression. It may not be good art, and it may avoid the darker sides of life, but its ambitions—with regard to the portrayal of the human experience—are still quite extraordinary.

But what of the ideological subtext of Rockwell, and its revelations about the undercurrents of American public sentiments? For one, there is a consistent emphasis on the comforts of conformity: People speak out (as in Election Day or Freedom of Speech), but even in these instances, we are directed more often to the notion that tranquility comes with getting along. The attractions of conformity are numerous, as so many social psychologists have noted through the years, and it is difficult for individuals to defy what seem to be group or community norms. Rockwell makes these comforts of conformity so vivid and so attractive: The menacing nature of conformity, of the authority of the community in crushing dissent, is disregarded entirely, buried in images about the rewards of conformity. Whether people conform and under what circumstances are empirical questions well studied by scholars, but our interest here is in the ideological depiction of conformity and the chronic attraction it seems to have in American life. Are the Rockwell pictures forceful and popular—through decades of the 20th century—because they tap the way we value conformity and togetherness over both rebellion and the real discomforts free speech can yield? We have our national heroes, who fought law and dominant social norms, and they are celebrated in popular culture. But these men and women are typically lauded years after their most violent struggles, at times when we can safely judge the norms of the previous period as corrupt and deserving of change.

There is no singular American mind—either conformist or nonconformist—but the immense popularity of Rockwell, I am arguing here, is far more complex than its simplicity and sentimentality. One of the darker sides of our attraction to Rockwell is that, subtextually and sometimes quite explicitly, it reinforces the charms of conformity and the fact that conformity is often the easiest route to take in considering social or political action. Rockwell sends the clear message that community is based on a sort of steadiness and calm, and the popularity of his work is no doubt linked to this in part. We have an omnipresent tension between individual and community, but the community always seems on top in the end.

**American Pictures and American Public Opinion**

Pictures and images matter, in understanding American public opinion. Historians have always relied on them in trying to get a sense of the politics and culture of other periods, but scholars interested specifically in public opinion, communication, and notions of the public tend to use written texts and statistics. In terms of the period of interest here—roughly 1940–1960—images are extraordinarily useful in exploring how the public was seen by influential elites (Rockwell) and by the people (his audience), who so
loved his images. The popularity of Rockwell’s work, the great resonance it had and still has in America, is one of the most compelling sets of documents students of public opinion could possibly study or hope to have.

One last criticism of Rockwell I should mention has been that he represents a small town existence, a lifestyle that ran counter to the true demographic state of mid-century America. This, alas, is unfair: At mid-century many Americans did live in small communities and not in the large metropolitan areas. As Richard Polenberg notes, sociologists working to understand trends and lifestyles in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s discovered much, but misunderstood some aspects of the country:

The United States was, in 1940, still predominantly a rural and small-town nation. Of the 131.7 million Americans listed in the census, 74.4 million—or 56.5 percent—were designated as “urban” dwellers. This, however, reflected the Census Bureau’s quaint definition of “urban” as “places having 2,500 inhabitants or more.” If a more sensible definition is adopted, a different pictures emerges. Fewer than 50 percent of all Americans lived in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, fewer than 40 percent lived in cities with more than 25,000, and only 30 percent lived in cities with more than 100,000. As late as 1940 some 70 million people lived in places with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, precisely the kinds of places that figured so prominently in the sociological literature. (1980, pp. 17–18)

So there is some correspondence between the size of community (and the sorts of interactions that size generates) in Rockwell’s work and the communities Americans actually experienced. What is interesting from the standpoint of public opinion and communication, though, is that there are few urban portraits of democracy to replace the more rural ones we inherit in Rockwell’s images. It is decidedly more difficult to portray the ways communities are built in urban settings. And Rockwell argued—consciously or not—that urban life and public spiritedness are somehow disconnected. Perhaps we still agree. This idea, that urbanization threatens community, is as old as cities themselves and even appears in the current sociological literature on community. But the question for students of publics and their evolution is whether we can imagine urban democracy, and if we can, why has it not been portrayed in the compelling way Rockwell linked small town life and public interactions?

In many ways, the two commonly held visions of the public in political theory—the public as aggregate and the public as a tightly networked entity—can and do coexist. People can be deeply connected to others around them but still willing and available as active respondents in opinion polls. But it would be a mistake to overlook that there is a tension between these views of the public, a tension that we see across images and tracts about the American public throughout mid-century. If we recognize these competing images, we begin to see how they are still with us and still part of a chronic debate about the nature of democracy in mass societies. Presidents, members of Congress, interest group leaders, journalists, and citizens themselves enter into bitter debates about what Americans feel and how we should measure those sentiments. Yet we are still, over six decades after Gallup got his start and opinion polling diffused, unsure about the best ways to query the public or understand it. In Gallup’s mind, aggregative methods were best, but the subtext of Rockwell’s extraordinarily resonant work is that public opinion resides in community, in conversation, in public meetings, and the like. We need not choose between these models, but we have to recognize that they are indeed
different models of the public and public opinion, with different assumptions, and both with some foundational claim to being our central model. And once we begin to develop a more sophisticated sense of who the public is, and how best to query its members under different circumstances, the closer we get to a most complicated issue in opinion research: bringing cultural analysis to bear when trying to understand data from aggregative studies.

While it is too lengthy a discussion for this article, I should not close without a word about the general topic of hegemony and propaganda. Rockwell has so often been dismissed artistically (as an illustrator extraordinaire, but not an artist). But he is also dismissed or at least categorized as propagandist for the American way. This may be the case, that although he did not work for the government he was, in Althussarian terminology, an ideological state apparatus. Certainly his pictures were used by many arms of the U.S. federal and state governments to cultivate patriotism or just good feeling. But to my mind, the texts are open ones, and their popularity is not simply an indicator of the sponge-like minds of Americans. We shall never know—just as with our most commonly found media texts today—whether people are unknowingly beaten into submission by imagery and then come to like it, or whether they are attracted to it in their own way, with little pressure at all. We have an extraordinarily interesting literature now on the nature of media reception, and while the mysteries of the process are in no way solved, it is clear that media and audience live in symbiosis, although of varying sorts in different contexts.

One of my points here has been that the meaning of public opinion is contested, a vital argument that still has not penetrated academic research to the extent it must. People were drawn to Rockwell for the idealized picture he paints, and that is not a picture of a deeply political or opinionated culture. Far from it, Rockwell’s people seek consensus and value kinship and friendship over conflict. As Michael Schudson has argued, perhaps distinctly political conversation (the sort of heated conversation democratic theorists celebrate) is not at all the “soul of democracy” as we know it. Perhaps, on the contrary, Americans like peace and quiet, and find conflict and heated discussion at odds with their vision of democracy. While Schudson is interested in other matters, he also seems to describe the American public which—whether we like it or not—knew and loved Rockwell. From the stunning popularity of the recent traveling exhibit, the extraordinary sales of reprints, books, cards, and paraphernalia, it looks as though Rockwell still reigns as premier purveyor of American dreams, and perhaps even a theorist of American public opinion.

Notes


2. This article does not address Rockwell’s career or his long and interesting life. See the recent, excellent biography of Rockwell by Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life* (New York: Random House, 2001).


4. Ned Rifkin, “Why Norman Rockwell, Why Now?” in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, p. 27. Some of the most useful information and statistics are provided by the Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge. One may browse many of the covers indexed by title, for example, at: http://www.nrm.org/exhibits/post-covers/

5. See one of the many extensive *Post* historical reviews on line. One of the best, with links to related artists is: http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAsaturday.htm.

6. For contemporary American magazine circulation figures, see http://www.magazine.org, which is the site of the Magazine Publishers of America. For census figures, see the historical archive of the U.S. Census at http://eire.census.gov.


10. Worries about the capacity of people to generate thoughtful opinions are as old as democracy itself, but became even more prominent with the arrival of the mass media and polling. Walter Lippmann was among the most vocal critics of mass opinion, but questions about public competence in evaluating public issues are still a preoccupation of political science and sociology. See Lippmann’s *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925) and much more recently Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

11. The size of Rockwell’s oeuvre is huge, even beyond the hundreds of *Post* covers. For this article, I focused on a variety of Rockwell pictures—primarily those we see most often reproduced, in books and retrospectives. In terms of making choices about which pictures to focus on, I leaned heavily on the recent traveling Rockwell retrospective and the art historical book published in tandem with that exhibit, *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*
I cannot argue that the pictures reproduced here are derived from a sampling technique, because such a thing is not possible or appropriate: All works of art are not equal in quality, intention, or popularity. So the “population” to sample from is quite different from populations of citizens (in the case of an opinion survey) or a population of news articles (in the case of a conventional media content analysis). Instead I focused on the Post covers, since we at least have circulation figures on these, and in particular, the covers that are often reproduced with fanfare in published Rockwell collections, which are numerous.


15. According to his son Peter, Shuffleton’s Barbershop was a real setting—a shop in East Arlington, Vermont, “into which he placed those details that told his story and from which he eliminated anything extraneous.” Rockwell, “Some Comments from the Boy in a Dining Car,” in Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People.

16. See, for example, the framed pictures available in the online store on the official Norman Rockwell Museum: http://store.nrm.org. The only civil rights picture available is The Problem We all Live With, while other somewhat more disturbing pictures are not to be found in this category.

17. Most of Rockwell’s renderings of women are traditional ones, with women serving as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. But there are a tiny number of pictures where women are portrayed in unusually strong ways, such as Rosie the Riveter, or in ways that underscore their careers, such as the 1930 Girl Running with Wet Canvas (Wet Paint).

18. One might view this—the nonstate institutions like medicine doing the work of the state—as Marxist critic Louis Althusser did when he wrote of “institutional state apparatuses” (ISAs). For Althusser, ISAs were insidious, serving as vehicles for an oppressive capitalist government intent on reinforcing false consciousness. See Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 127–186.

19. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this insight.


23. Rockwell himself was unhappy with the results in Freedom from Fear. He notes in his autobiography that it—along with Freedom of Want, lacked “wallop.” Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator, p. 343.


References