

# Invisible Sovereign: Imagining Public Opinion From the Revolution to Reconstruction

Robert Shimp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Shimp, Robert (2016) "Invisible Sovereign: Imagining Public Opinion From the Revolution to Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/17>

## Review

Shimp, Robert

Summer 2016

**Schmeller, Mark G.** *Invisible Sovereign: Imagining Public Opinion from the Revolution to Reconstruction*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9781421418704

### The Evolving Role of Public Opinion in America

While the general public's thoughts are ubiquitous in our age of constant poll results and social media, Prof. Mark G. Schmeller argues that public opinion also held a central role in early American culture and politics. However, the process through which it reached its prominence was anything but straightforward or static. *Invisible Sovereign: Imagining Public Opinion from the Revolution to Reconstruction* is Prof. Schmeller's first book-length publication and is a welcome inclusion into early American historiography for our understanding of popular politics and participatory government. The text draws on "no undiscovered archives" (223), but rather provides an important synthesis on a subject that has been oft referenced and cited, yet never considered over a full length monograph. This in itself is a worthy endeavor, but given the scope of the text, *Invisible Sovereign* is not without its shortcomings.

*Invisible Sovereign* is a brisk 180 pages spaced over an introduction and six chapters, yet is dense, thorough, and well versed in the period's historiography. The book proceeds in a generally chronological order but primarily holds a thematic approach to the subject of public opinion. On this note, the first half of the book is far more coherent than the second. Schmeller argues that public opinion must hold a central place in historiographical considerations on the United States' founding and developmental years, for it was an "indispensable" (2), if at times vague and malleable, presence in political, social, and moral debates.

*Invisible Sovereign* is less focused on delimiting what public opinion was, however, than how the general concept was harnessed or held at arm's length. As a result, in terms of defining public opinion Schmeller consistently notes that

it meant different things at different times, but the titular phrase ‘invisible sovereign’ does well to clarify his meaning. Though enigmatic, Schmeller equates public opinion to the ability of the general populace to either drive the direction of the nation, or perhaps, spur individuals to react against the tenor of the public for their own national or more localized agendas. He concludes that public opinion generally transitioned from something exhibited via politics to something that came “from outside the political sphere” (4). He posits public opinion, at least as it came to exist in the United States, held its roots in the English Commonwealth period and with the French *philosophes*, but had little relevance in colonial North America.

As he moves beyond introductory overtures on the topic, Schmeller seems on the surest footing in his discussions on public opinion during the early Republic. He casts the Hamilton/Madison divide in light of their differing views on public opinion writ large. Hamilton, Schmeller asserts, linked public opinion with public confidence, the lynchpin of his economic system. Indeed, at its core, “money is credit, and credit is, at bottom, a matter of opinion” (38). Conversely, according to his argument, Madison’s wariness on the matter came down to his fears on a republic’s size and the ease with which the public could be swayed with misinformation as the nation expanded. While Hamilton’s system won in the short term, as Schmeller recounts, the chapter would have been better served by delving into George Washington’s specter in the young nation. In terms of public opinion, surely the Constitution’s initial ratification and survival had much to do with the universally beloved General’s indispensable approval and support. Washington, at least for the first years under the Constitution, held as much consensus in public opinion as any one figure or concept could have demanded.

Despite this oversight, Schmeller is quite convincing in his arguments on public opinion as a major source of tension between Democrats and Whigs during the second party system’s formation. His judicious use of graphs to chart the skyrocketing use of the term “public opinion” in the press over both the 1790s and later in the 1820s bolsters his argument. For Schmeller, Democrats subscribed to a “political-constitutional” conception of public opinion which linked their politics directly to the will of the people. Conversely, Whigs espoused a more limited “social-psychological” defense of public opinion as it related to parties. Whigs aimed to disentangle genuine opinion from manufactured political opinion, which they perceived to be shrouded under the false title of public opinion. In following this argument, it is clear that Democrats

championed public opinion from the masses, while Whigs conservatively believed it should be carefully guided by august politicians.

The work provides a clear line of argumentation over first three chapters, but the latter half loses pace with seemingly more idiosyncratic appearances for public opinion in the country's development. While the book's fourth chapter does well to link public opinion with antebellum reform movements' desire to tap into and guide the morality of the American public, it loses the previous chapters' coherent political superstructure. The thread is slightly revived in detailing the malleable nature of public opinion as it related to violence in and amongst press editors, and is generally restored in Schmeller's final chapter, which surmises while public opinion held significance for both Northern abolitionists and Southern slaveholders, its intractable divide between the two camps left the sectional crisis unable to be patched over by public consensus.

Despite the presence of 'Reconstruction' in the title, a narrower scope would have improved the text as the postbellum period only receives a scant few pages by way of conclusion. Though the odd error may crop up--- it was John Quincy Adams running against Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay in 1824, not his still-living father John Adams (75)--- the text weaves together both well-known and more obscure figures and events into a dynamic narrative. Ultimately, this ambitious effort to synthesize the unwieldy concept of public opinion may be the first word on the subject, at least as it relates to the United States, but will likely not serve as the last. On the whole, the book is best suited for graduate seminars and should prove useful to intellectual and political historians alike.

*Robert Shimp is a Ph.D. candidate in History at Boston University. His in-progress dissertation centers on John Quincy Adams' affiliations with and influences from Great Britain. His email is robshimp@bu.edu.*