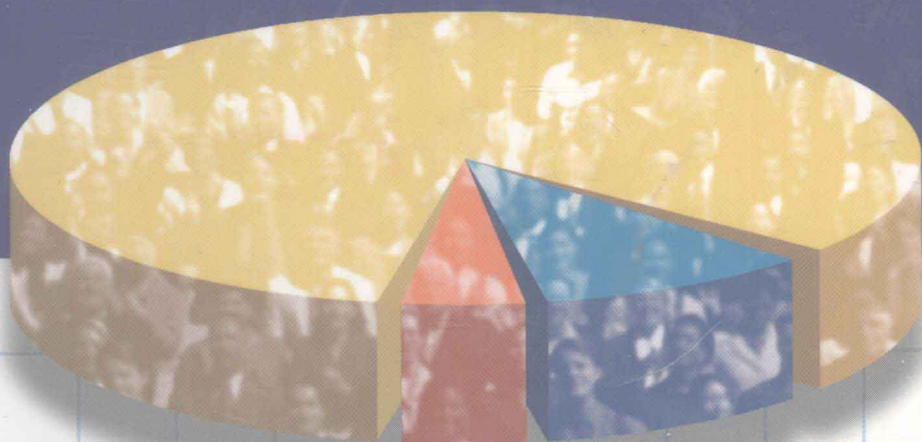


PUBLIC OPINION

Measuring the American Mind

Second Edition



Barbara A. Bardes

Robert W. Oldendick



Public Opinion

Measuring the American Mind

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Preface

It seems that every day the media reports polling data on some aspect of life in the United States. Whether it's a report on alcohol and drug use among high school students, the public's latest approval ratings of the President, or support for the "war on terrorism," the American public is presented with information on a wide range of subjects that may have some impact on their lives. Given the widespread use of polls in this country, our goal for this book is to characterize "the American mind," meaning contemporary public opinion in this country, but also to describe how public opinion data are collected, how they are used, and the role they play in the American political system.

One objective of this book is to provide information on how survey data are collected and the types of factors that a good consumer of polls should know in evaluating public opinion data. Characteristics of a survey, including the way the sample was chosen, the design of the questionnaire, and how the data were collected, are discussed fairly extensively in order to provide you with questions you should ask when presented with poll results.

A second objective is to demonstrate various ways in which public opinion data are used. Data from surveys have become increasingly important to federal agencies as well as to state and local governments. Candidates for public office depend on surveys for deciding how to develop their campaigns. The results of survey research are important to academic researchers in a variety of fields, including political science, sociology, mass communications, and public health. The media make use of surveys in their coverage of elections as well as in their reporting on public policy issues. Our discussion of the use of public

opinion data provides an overview of the many ways in which survey data are a part of American political life.

Any text on public opinion must provide information on what the public believes, and this is the focus of much of this text. We discuss how Americans come to hold opinions on issues and politics, and then describe the American public's views on a number of social-welfare issues, racial questions, cultural issues, and foreign policy issues. We also look at how the public expresses its political views and attachments to the system.

Finally, we consider the role that public opinion plays in the American political system. Does public opinion matter in our democratic system, and how is public opinion translated into public policy? As part of this discussion, we also take a critical look at the way in which public opinion data are collected and used; we then identify several factors that may change the way in which poll results are used.

We present data on a number of different issues, but these represent only a minute fraction of the vast array of current and historical survey data available. Such data are becoming more available through the Internet, so we have included in each chapter a section on "Polls, Polling, and the Internet." This section identifies sites at which data are available or which contain information about polling and the survey industry. The range of topics for which data are available is virtually limitless, and we encourage you to visit these sites and explore your interests concerning the American mind.

An effort such as this is not completed without the assistance of a number of people. We would like to thank the staffs of Raymond Walters College of the University of Cincinnati and the University of South Carolina's Institute for Public Service and Policy Research for their support. In particular, we would like to thank Michael Link for his assistance in creating the data files and data processing, and to acknowledge the research assistance of Todd Anderson and Sherri Downing-Alfonso, as well as the clerical assistance of Freda Atkinson. This manuscript has benefited significantly from the suggestions of the reviewers Ted Jelen, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, William Jacoby, University of South Carolina, and Clyde Wilcox, Georgetown University. We would also like to thank Mark Carrozza and Eric Rademacher of the University of Cincinnati Institute for Policy Research for help with this revision, and our colleague Stephen E. Bennett, for his insightful comments and suggestions. Finally, we would like to thank Clark Baxter, our publisher, Sharon Adams Poore and Melissa Gleason of ITP/Wadsworth Publishing Company for their support and skillful editing. Their work has resulted in a much improved product.

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P a r t I



Public Opinion and
American Democracy



Public Opinion and American Democracy

Questions to Consider:

Was public opinion important to the Founding Fathers?

What do we mean by public opinion?

Does public opinion really matter to elected officials?

In historical perspective, the importance of public opinion in the United States is evident in the origin of the nation. The authors of *The Federalist* refer to "... the public voice proclaimed by the representatives of the people ..." and while the Founding Fathers were wary of the evils resulting from an overbearing majority, they recognized the need to acknowledge the public's voice in developing public policy (Federalist No. 10: 81). Although the general notion of "public opinion" was anticipated in the works of Plato and Aristotle, as well as the Romans (Palmer, 1936: 231–232), we can trace the modern concept of public opinion to Rousseau in 1744 (Hubert, 1992: 30). The idea that emerged from the Enlightenment of a mass public competent to exercise its sovereignty was instrumental in shaping the role of the public in the democratic society that developed in the United States.

In addition to a system in which the individual is the focus of the political process, traditional democratic theory assumes that each member of the electorate is interested in public issues, motivated by principle, aware of relevant facts, and capable of making decisions rationally. In a democratic system, the opinions of the public are to be translated into action (Hennessy, 1981: 13–15).

As stated succinctly by Achen, the starting point of democratic theory is that "... public opinion on policy matters" (1975: 1220). It is the views of adults on policy issues that we refer to as "the American mind."

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984: 76) has noted that David Hume's basic principle, that it is on opinion only that government is founded, became the doctrine of the Founding Fathers of the United States. The importance of public opinion has been evident throughout this country's history. Abraham Lincoln, for example, wrote that in politics "... public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed" (quoted in Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, 1973: 10). Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for re-election in 1968 was in large part attributable to the erosion of public support for the Vietnam War and, consequently, his presidency (P. Converse, 1987). Similarly, public disapproval of his performance in office, along with a myriad of other factors, contributed to Richard Nixon's decision to resign the presidency in 1974. Modern political campaigns, not only for the presidency but at all levels, are replete with references to "what the public wants."

The role that public opinion should play in American democracy is a topic for debate in contemporary politics. During Congress' consideration of the impeachment and conviction of President Bill Clinton for lying about his relationship with a White House intern, the media and polling organizations supplied almost daily polls regarding what the public thought and what the public wanted Congress to do. As the Senate began to consider conviction of the president in 1999, polls showed public approval of the job the president was doing remaining very high, higher than before the scandal began. Polls showed that the public did not want the president ousted from office by conviction in the Senate. As the scandal and the trial dragged on, only public views regarding the president's moral character declined. The Senate, controlled by the Republicans, could not muster the two-thirds vote to convict Clinton, in part, because there was no public sentiment for them to do so.

In his description of the place of public opinion in American politics, Philip Converse (1987) described the exchange that took place during the Iran-Contra hearings in which Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North chastised the members of Congress for failing to support the Contra resistance in Nicaragua, and was, in turn, chastised by Senator Warren Rudman. Senator Rudman indicated that Congress had been appropriately reflecting public sentiment, pointing out that public opinion polls had been running 75-25 against support for the Contras. In Converse's view, what was significant about this event from the standpoint of public opinion was that (1) nobody challenged the accuracy of the public opinion figures and (2) nobody challenged Rudman's claim of basic authority for the voice of the public. The importance of the public's views is inherent in debates over public policy. Throughout the history of the United States, the important role played by public opinion has evidenced itself in many ways.