

**SURVEYING  
PUBLIC  
OPINION**

**Sondra Miller Rubenstein**



# Surveying Public Opinion

**SONDRA MILLER  
RUBENSTEIN**  
HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY



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*This book is dedicated to all victims of hate, indifference, and manipulated public opinion, past and present, including those in my own family who were but a tiny part of the six million Jewish and the five million non-Jewish victims—including gays, Christians, Gypsies, political dissidents, people with disabilities, and others—murdered by the Nazis, their supporters, and the silence of public opinion.*

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# Preface

## **ON FEAR, HATE, HISTORY, HOPE, AND PUBLIC OPINION**

Fear and hope were the primary motivating forces behind this book. A teacher for many years, I have come to realize that far too many students are passive recipients of information. They prefer to get just what they need or want to know—and their opinions—the easy way, from audiovisual media, rather than from diverse print sources or discussion and analysis. What frightens me is the vulnerability to exploitation that this creates.

I see a cancerous spread of hate over campuses across the country, along with the increasing fragmentation and disunity of our entire society. I worry about the increased number of historical revisionists, the growth of intolerance, and the unabashed ignorance on which hate-filled opinions are based and unashamedly repeated.

Others also have been observing that college students (the ones who do not care about reading history's documented truths and the pursuit of knowledge on their own) are ready recipients for "feel-good" and "feel-superior" messages. The merchants of hate do not care about thinking citizens with informed opinions; they want to *use* students—and all the public—to suit their own political agenda. As a case in point, consider the words of Bradley R. Smith, of the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust, speaking in Long Beach, California, in August 1991: "I want to go to students. They are superficial. They are empty vessels to be filled."

Although Smith is peddling lies, he feels he can sell his wares because students are uninformed. Still, as John Milton wrote so long ago, when truth and falsehood grapple, "Who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?" And that is the responsibility of education—to enable the truth to be heard. Thus my hope in writing this book is that at least those who read it will not be "empty vessels" susceptible to the likes of such masters of deceit as Mr. Smith.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One day Gerry Levine, the Wadsworth regional representative, stopped by my office at Hofstra to discuss the company's latest books that could be of use in the courses I teach. Gerry, a smart and friendly fellow, also took the time to ask if I had any ideas for a new text. In fact, I had just started thinking about the difficulty I had had in finding a text for the new undergraduate course I had developed on surveying public opinion. I sketched my ideas for him and he told me to put together a proposal and to send it along to Wadsworth. It was that simple.

But then began the hard part, and here is where an invaluable support system of members of the "attentive public," consisting of family, friends, professional colleagues, and Wadsworth staff, helped to make it happen. Within Wadsworth, beginning with Gerry through Joshua King, Todd Armstrong, Karen Garrison, and the talented copy editor Jennifer Gordon, I found the smartest, "coolest" professionals who seemed to have unlimited patience and wisdom to dispense. I sincerely thank them and all the others at Wadsworth whose efforts brought this book to fruition.

Through Wadsworth, I benefited from the wise comments of several reviewers, including Roy Atwood, University of Idaho; James Berstein, Indiana University; Sharon Dunwoody, University of Wisconsin, Madison; Donald Granberg, University of Missouri; William Griswold; Patrick A. Pierce, Saint Mary's College; James L. Rogers, University of North Texas; Chris Salmon, Michigan State University; David Sodofsky, California State University, Hayward; Mary Trapp, California State University, Hayward; Charles Whitney, University of California, Santa Barbara; and John W. Windhauser, Louisiana State University. I thank them and assure them that they were all very helpful in the development of this text. Their comments forced me to sort out some of my conflicting opinions and feelings about a myriad of issues.

Naomi Hirsch, my friend of many years, was invaluable to me not only because of her friendship, but also because of her skill as a proofreader and sounding board. Her patience and willingness to read and reread material seemed endless. I appreciate her efforts.

As for family, I have a strange immediate family. We all read the newspapers, listen to political discussion programs, and are always exchanging ideas about the best advice to give political figures on everything from Bosnia to the role of the president's wife. My husband Murray, son Eric, and daughters Leeanne and Paula all write and have always been ready to critique whatever I have shown them. I thank them for their love, support, and professional contributions to this text.



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PART I

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# What's It All About?





# Introducing the Study of Opinion Research

*Think about—*

What is meant by the word *theory*?

Can we make a distinction between public opinion polling and survey research?

What do *you* mean when you talk about public opinion?

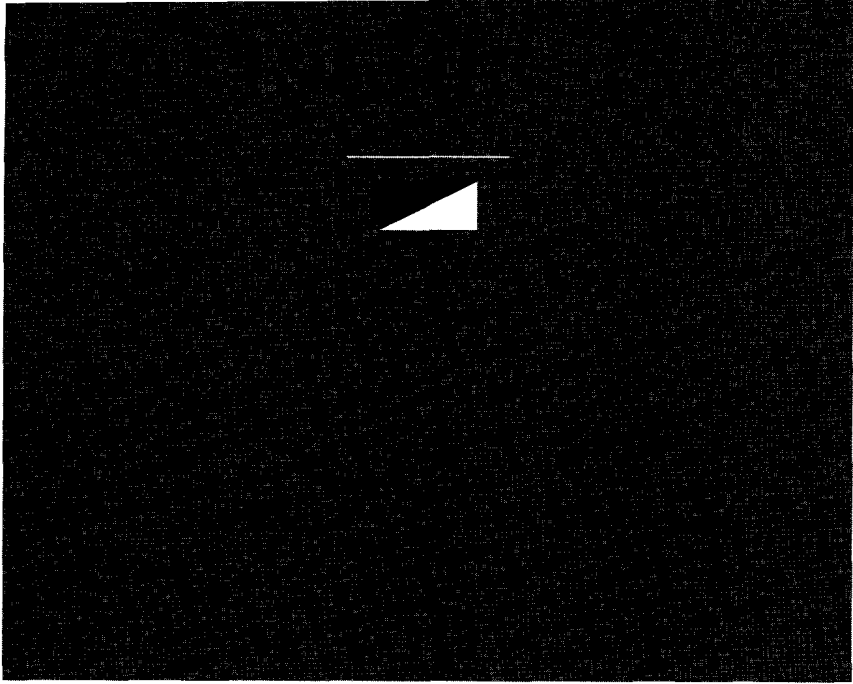
When, how, and why did public opinion emerge as a force to be considered?

What are the characteristics or qualities of public opinion?

What is meant by the attentive public, and why are some of us attentive while others are not?

What role do you think public opinion should play in the decisions of our government?





## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**T**his book is meant to demystify public opinion polls and, to whatever extent possible, to demystify the concept of public opinion. It is intended to be an introductory text. My aim is to provide an overview of the subject by presenting different aspects of a complex field that seeks to describe, explain, predict, and represent the views of the public on important issues.

In many respects, the book's organization and its writing style are my reaction to personal experiences both as a student and as a professor. As a student, I always wondered why so many social science textbooks needed professional deciphering. I particularly resented the use of pompous language in discussions on *theories* or *paradigms*, words that seemed to guarantee droopy eyelids among my contemporaries. In defense against the perceived verbal onslaught, I developed the habit of reading with a pencil and jotting down my own interpretive notes and comments in the margins of my books. I soon realized that I could often write one or two sentences conveying the sense of a long (and often boring) paragraph.

By the time I was a graduate student, I had a growing suspicion (a developing theory) that there may have been a hidden agenda that explained the unnecessary complexity of certain textbooks. In cynical moments, I even believed that professors who used such books did so to justify their