

Public Opinion

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DAVID O. SEARS

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Preface

Everyone, you will find, is an expert on public opinion; after all he is a member of the public and he knows how he feels and what he thinks about an issue. Or does he? There is a great deal about the way in which people borrow opinions, or reach down into their experience for guidance which is, even for the individual himself, out of sight. For example, most of us like to think of ourselves as rational, independent-minded, critical thinkers, forming our opinions on the basis of a judicious consideration of the facts. We rarely think of our opinions as being formed by group memberships, forgotten childhood

experiences, party labels, friendship patterns. The message of this little book is that in many ways all of these are the same. It is a curious fact that one of the benefits of studying public opinion comes in the knowledge it gives to individuals about themselves. At least it gives them some ideas which they can use in examining their own opinion processes.

Yet, even if it were true that people were endowed with perfect self-knowledge, they might not understand what others were doing or thinking, or how they did these things. People differ in these respects; the middle-class college student may think the working-class man has the same values, information, and skills that he himself has; or the interested and alert young man may feel that his apathetic neighbor is basically like himself but only needs awakening. In many important respects this is not true. The study of public opinion, then, teaches something about the diversity of mankind, the many different ways in which people arrive at their judgments or opinions.

Our study deals mostly with the ways people arrive at their opinions—this, rather than exploring just what it is the public believes. We hope that understanding the mechanisms and processes of opinion formation provides a permanently useful set of tools for subsequent use by students, who like everyone else, forget data but may remember and use insights into how people behave.

There is one other matter to be said about the study of public opinion at this time, at least as we see the problem. We have observed that a great controversy seems to be going on about the question of autonomy versus conformity, group pressure and individual decision. Several of our chapters deal with this problem, for it is a bothersome one, not only for our time, but for other periods of history as well—and even for the understanding of the origins and workings of democracy. Perhaps, in some small way, our treatment can clarify public discussion of this issue.

We are indebted to many people, for, like the writers of most contemporary interpretations, we have relied heavily on the research done by many authors. Wherever possible, we have cited their work in the text; these citations should be read as part of our recognition of acknowledgment and gratitude to the many fine scholars in this field today. In addition, we wish to thank Robert Dahl, the Editor of this series, for his valuable suggestions, and James Murray and Wilbur Mangas of Prentice-Hall for their helpful assistance at every stage.

Robert E. Lane
David O. Sears

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From Public Opinion to Public Policy?

C H A P T E R O N E

Government policy, and, indeed, all important historical events, are shaped by the opinions of the members of the political communities involved. That is why we are interested in public opinion. Shall the national government pass a civil rights bill? Have the “warhawks” prepared us for war? Shall the city issue bonds to pay for a new school? The resolution of all of these issues is influenced in one way or another by the sentiments of the public—although the influence is often circuitous and hard to follow.

Areas of Public Opinion

Opinions have to be *about* something; the ones we are mainly interested in are about four things. First, they are about the political system, the regime, the constitutional framework, the way issues get decided. These opinions go to the root of things; disagreement on such matters can, if they are widespread, cause the system to break down. One of the main functions of public opinion in a going, stable regime is to provide a generalized support for the regime. Popular opinion provides effective legitimacy. Where this legitimacy is missing, the alienation of the disaffected can be expressed in (a) apathy and withdrawal—the more usual form—or, on occasion, in (b) the special politics of alienation—often destructive, irrational (in a sense we shall describe), and seemingly less interested in *what* is to be decided than in *who* will decide. Generalized support or alienated disaffection? This is the first question for public opinion and the first reason to be interested in it.

If, as in the United States, the question of the constitutional order is pretty well agreed upon by most people, a second subject for public opinion, in our consideration, is the question of the choice of group loyalties and identifications. Opinions cluster by groups: regional, national origin, race, religion, urban-rural status, and social class or status. Consciously or unconsciously people tend to identify with such groups as these (and many more specific ones: unions, trade associations, sporting clubs, and so forth) and to draw their opinions from these identifications. Politically, one of the most important of these group loyalties is loyalty to a political party. It is derived, in part, from sentiments toward the various social groups. And party loyalty is in many ways the most important single determinant of vote decisions in the United States. Although party loyalties have a life of their own, in the long run they are likely to be determined by whether the various social groups, which are more intimately related to people's daily lives, support one or another party. The pattern of loyalties to parties and other groups, then, is a crucial focus in the study of public opinion, for it affects the broadest policy orientations of government, gives strength to some group demands and not others, and directly affects the choice of leaders.

The choice of leaders itself is a third area of public opinion which attracts our attention. The public makes its selection only after the field has been narrowed down to a few of the many possible candidates, but the narrowing down is obviously done with public reaction in mind—and the final estimate by the public in its role as electorate is an important one. What kind of men do various elements of the public prefer? Strong, heroic types—as in the *personalismo* politics of the Latin-American republics? Men with certain “common-man” qualities whose reactions will be familiar and understood? Men whose social and occupational status makes it appropriate that they should hold “high office”? Public preferences and opinions on these matters shape public policy and the course of history in a variety of important ways.

Finally (fourth) there is the matter of public issues—topics, like the civil rights legislation mentioned above, or admission of China to the United Nations, or an embargo on Cuba, or aid to education by the federal government—on which some segment of the public has an opinion. These topics vary greatly in their power to attract attention and support or opposition; often the attentive public is rather small, and the informed public even smaller, but in the absence of strong opposition even a small public can make its influence felt. On the other hand, there is often a diffuse, badly informed, but intensely held set of opinions prevalent among a large public, a situation which poses a hazard for the better-informed political leaders. However these qualities of interest, intensity, and persuasion may be distributed, the issues which the course of history throws to the surface at any one time will find a resolution somehow shaped by public opinion.

Translating Opinion into Policy

The process of “shaping” is an enormously complicated one, but at the very least we can identify, if not completely explain, some of the ways in which this is done. The most obvious, of course, is the electoral process culminating in the vote. Here the ordinary members of the public, the people we are interested in in this book, experience a sense of choice and, for the most part, a feeling of influencing important events. Beyond that, there is the matter of writing letters and sending deputations to Congress or the State House or some other seat of power. Only about 10 per cent of the American public in any one year undertake this kind of activity. The act of joining, and therefore supporting, one or more of the many overlapping “interest-groups” in the United States gives force to some points of view, sometimes a point of view explicitly presented to civil servants and legislatures by lobbyists. This is also true, in a less obvious way, of the support given to certain media. Congressmen pay a great deal of attention to what the papers and television and radio commentators are saying. Papers with a wide circulation and programs with a considerable audience are, in a sense, made more powerful by their audiences. Then, too, there is the survey or poll respondent whose answers to questions on issues and men become part of a news report (or perhaps a private research report to the sponsoring official) revealing the current state of opinion—a condition which the wise official regards as partially plastic.

But the more we examine the influence of public opinion on policy, the more it seems desirable to stress the indirect influence, rather than the direct mandate theory, the idea that legislation perfectly reflects constituent opinion. Recent studies by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan have shown that there is a very tenuous relationship between the roll call votes of a congressman and the opinions of his constituents on a variety of issues: in long-established areas of controversy (such as social welfare legislation) there is a reasonably close correspondence—in foreign policy almost none. Moreover, in competitive districts there is much less correspondence between legislative views and popular

views than in less competitive districts—an odd and interesting finding in itself. As a consequence of this kind of new information, one is more likely to emphasize the influence of public opinion on the early shaping of the basic values and predispositions of political leaders, and the more informal and continuing “education” they receive in their daily contacts and life experiences in and out of office, in and out of their official roles. In many ways, it is the basic belief systems which these men develop in their pre-official lives which makes them responsive to the needs and values of their constituents—but this lies somewhat beyond the scope of our particular study.

The Scope of Inquiry

Americans, in particular, do not really doubt that public opinion is influential in the shaping of events. The interesting questions come in refining our understanding of this process—something we shall attempt to do in this small volume. We will begin, in the next chapter, by outlining the nature of an opinion (public or private) so that we will have a clearer picture of what we are talking about. Then, in the following three chapters, we will discuss the formation of such opinions: how they are often first acquired in the home, and then gradually changed by experience; how group memberships exert their subtle but powerful pressures; how political and other leaders shape people’s opinions. Finally, in the remaining chapters, in what is the most controversial part of this study, we take up four problems of public opinion which have been much argued over in recent times. One of these is the set of problems implied by the low level of information and the poor quality of thought applied to political matters. Another, closely related, problem is the confusing issue of rationality in politics. A third problem has to do with conformity—is it such a bad thing, after all? And fourth, we discuss some aspects of emotional intensity in politics. How shall we achieve a political style which carries conviction but not fanaticism? And what shall we do about the intense minority and the apathetic majority?

Portrait of an Opinion

C H A P T E R T W O

Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie, says Walter Lippmann, is trying to understand the news reports on the First World War. "She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield. Pictures of French and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. . . . Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and so if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were engaged in a personal duel.

Perhaps if you could see what she sees with her mind's eye, the image in its composition might be not unlike an eighteenth century engraving of a great soldier. He stands unruffled and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind."¹ How shall we analyze Miss Sherwin's opinions, and the opinions of the public of which she is so significant a part?

Lane asked O'Hara, a sprightly little mechanic in Eastport, "What groups do you think have the most influence on city politics?" First he frowned and then he smiled: "Oh [pause] labor has something to do with it—there's no doubt about that; your Knights of Columbus, your Masons, and things like that. They've got a lot to do with it, because, as it is, the higher you get up in the Knights, or you get up in the Masons or something, you're more or less up there—you're pulling a lot more weight there. Your veterans' organizations have a lot to do with it, too—like your American Legion and that. The American Legion has a lot to do with it, not only in the city, but all over—they pull a lot of power."² O'Hara is a lot closer to city politics than Miss Sherwin is to the battlefronts, but like her, he must pull together a lot of vague impressions, organize them, and formulate an opinion.

An opinion, we will say, is "an implicit verbal response or 'answer' that an individual gives in response to a particular stimulus situation in which some general 'question' is raised."³ It may or may not be overtly expressed; Lane asked O'Hara to express his opinions, but perhaps he had a private opinion on the power of these groups before it came up in this way and perhaps he had some opinions he did not care to tell his interviewer. In reading the paper Miss Sherwin may have been formulating opinions which she never had a chance to express. But if they are expressed, or implied, so that an analyst can see them, how shall we describe them?

Describing an Opinion

The two dimensions which public opinion analysts most commonly use to describe an opinion are *direction* and *intensity*.

DIRECTION

When we say an opinion has direction, we mean that it includes some affective or emotional quality of approving or disapproving of something. It has a "pro-con" quality. Miss Sherwin is pro-Joffre and anti-Kaiser in their duel, and O'Hara says, in a later passage, that he trusts the veterans' organizations more than most groups. Stated or implied, this pro-con quality is almost always there.

If direction tells us, in effect, "yes" or "no," what shall we do with

¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Penguin, 1946), p. 8.

² For further interpretation of the opinions of urban working men, see Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962).

³ Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 6.

"maybe" or "it depends"? These are, in effect, requests by the respondent for new "questions" with greater specificity so that he may qualify his commitment, avoiding a "yes" or "no" answer. This is the purpose of a "qualified answer." In general, the analysis of opinions should include this matter of "qualification," since it gives us a more detailed picture of the psychic disposition of the opinion holder, but it is not easy to get at. Moreover, it is more difficult to categorize respondents if each gives a slightly different answer.

Some groups of people tend to qualify answers more than others: Educated people give more "qualified" answers than do those with little education; and intensity of feeling, as one might expect, tends to discourage qualification. Oral answers, too, tend to bring out qualifications more than do written communication. Qualification serves something of a protective function in the face-to-face situation; also, the ease of expression tends to make the longer qualified statement less of a burden.⁴

Under some circumstances, there are tendencies to give mostly pro or mostly con answers regardless of the content of the question. For example, the Lynds say that the Middletown spirit supports "being loyal, and a 'booster,' not a knocker."⁵ Lane finds that the concept of good citizenship in Eastport emphasizes "supportive" rather than "critical" attitudes.⁶ "Accentuate the positive" says a song popular in the 'forties. Perhaps a culture can shape the attitudinal direction of a people so that, compared to others, they express opinions more in one of these directions than another.

But if the culture emphasizes the positive in some important respects, perhaps this is not true of the area of culture most fraught with conflict—politics. It is said, for example, that in politics, each candidate spends so much time criticizing his opponent that observers come away with a totally negative impression (in contrast, for example, with advertising, where each product is eulogized since it is illegal to disparage an opponent's product, and observers presumably come away with a totally positive impression). Actually, this is not the case. In one study of a California election—a hard fought one, at that—only 25 per cent of the candidates' total public references were critical of the opposition.⁷ But still, people might be more likely to vote *against* the opposition than *for* the candidate and party they favor. This seems to vary a great deal. In Boston, local elections seem to be of this kind; voters look for the candidate who will do the least harm.⁸ Roper states that in New York in 1945, in reply to queries on why persons were voting for their respective candidates (O'Dwyer, Morris, Goldstein), he received only vague and unpersuasive answers such as a man's "good experience" or "his good record." But this

⁴ Deane Neubauer, Carolyn Pratt, Elinor J. Rubens, and John Thomas, "An Introduction to Political Conversation," unpublished paper, 1963.

⁵ Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937), p. 404.

⁶ Lane, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-186.

⁷ Galen Rarick, *California Daily Newspaper Reporting of the 1950 U.S. Senatorial Campaign: A Content Analysis* (M.A. Thesis, Stanford University Library, 1951), as summarized in Stanford University News Press Releases, January 26, 1951.

⁸ Murray B. Levin, *The Alienated Voter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

was not true of answers to his queries about why people voted against the opposition candidate. Here the replies were informed and emotional, suggesting that more thought and attention went into these negative aspects of voting than went into the endorsements implied in a positive vote.⁹ But in national politics, at least in 1952, when asked to talk about the good and bad points of the two candidates, the average person was able to enumerate more good than bad attributes in these political aspirants.¹⁰ The tendency to be generally “pro” or generally “con” is one of several possible “response sets”; that is, a fixed tendency to answer all questions in a certain way. There seems generally to be a more positive “response set” toward national political leaders than local political leaders. Like the valet who knows his master best, the public may be most critical of those whose governing is closest to them.

Another aspect of this matter is whether or not systematic differences exist between persons in terms of their tendencies to give pro or con answers, regardless of the question. Of course, the distinction between “boosters” and “knockers” has been current in popular discourse for a long time, but only recently has this idea of “response sets” been systematically measured. We still do not know very much about it, but one recent study concludes that the difference between “Yeasayers” and “Naysayers” reflects basic personality dynamics. The findings of this study suggest “that the best single characterization of the traits associated with agreeing response set is *Stimulus Acceptance* vs. *Stimulus Rejection*. The yeasayer accepts stimuli both by admitting them to consciousness without censorship, alteration, or assimilation and by agreeing with, acting out, and otherwise yielding to the pressures of stimuli exerted on him. The naysayer tends to reject these same stimuli.”¹¹ Milbrath took this notion and tried it out on some data he had on Washington lobbyists and a national election study. He found that those who had a positive response set tended to be Democrats and those with a negative response set tended to be Republicans—a pattern with relatively low but statistically significant correlations. This was especially true in the national election study of those Democrats whose fathers were non-partisan, that is, who arrived at their party identification more on the basis of their own choice than of simple inheritance. One reason for this, he discovered, was that there was a low but positive and significant correlation between a liberalism or “social welfare” scale and the yeasaying tendency. Nor could any of these relationships be explained away on the basis of education or social status, although these factors weakened the relationship where they could be applied.¹² However, this proposition needs further research support before it can be regarded as conclusive.

⁹ Elmo Roper, “New York Elects O’Dwyer,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (1946), pp. 53–56.

¹⁰ Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1954), pp. 53–54.

¹¹ Arthur Couch and Kenneth Keniston, “Yeasayers and Naysayers: Agreeing Response Set as a Personality Variable,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 60 (1960), p. 170; see also “Agreeing Response Set and Social Desirability” by these same authors in the same *Journal*, Vol. 62 (1961), pp. 175–179.

¹² Lester W. Milbrath, “Latent Origins of Liberalism-Conservatism and Party Identification: A Research Note,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 24 (1962), pp. 679–688.