
Reader in
Public Opinion
and
Mass Communication

Third Edition

EDITED BY ·

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This classical orientation is exemplified here in the selections by Bryce and Lowell. Although speculative in tone, they raise many of the issues taken up by contemporary researchers in empirical studies. Bryce discusses the stages of public opinion formation, stressing the importance of opinion leaders, news organs, and public debate. He also expresses the view that most individuals do not have a consistent and enduring ideology. This same issue is still debated by researchers today, as we shall see in Section 3 in the exchange between Nie and Andersen and Bishop et al. Lowell offers a set of still-contemporary requirements for the emergence of effective public opinion, maintaining that a high degree of social integration and political legitimation are necessary for the formation of a meaningful public consent.

The selections by Lasswell, Lippmann, and Katz are more concerned with social psychological aspects of public opinion. On several points, they are less optimistic than Bryce and Lowell in emphasizing individual patterns of affectivity and particularism, which impair the "rational" process of public discourse and opinion formation. For these theorists, impediments to the formation of intelligent public opinion should be analyzed at the level of individuals rather than that of social institutions. The problems they raise are inherent in the cognitive and affective limitations of human beings and therefore are less amenable to resolution through changes in social policy.

In his varied approaches, Lasswell emphasizes personality factors. He discusses symbols that inspire collective allegiances, grounding his discussion in Freudian psychoanalysis, which explains collective identifications as regressions to infantile affect. Here the meaning of Lasswell's famous "political personality" is clear: It entails the displacement of private affect onto public objects. The image is one in which politics becomes a ritual of obeisance to symbols "endowed with godlike attributes" in a "collective mission [which] is idealized."

Both Lippmann and Katz emphasize the positive functions of adaptive psychological mechanisms. Lippmann observes that while stereotypes distort, they also supply the cognitive information necessary for making a "hurried and multifarious" world intelligible. In Katz's treatment the components of values and the relationships among values are formalized in an effort to present a social psychology of attitudes. He offers a typology of the functions of attitudes for individuals that moves toward a model of the relationships among values, social integration, and the larger political process. This is the most contemporary of all the selections in this section. The reader may wish to compare Katz's maxim that "the raw material out of which public opinion develops is to be found in the attitudes of individuals" with Bryce's assertion that public opinion is neither "the aggregate of all that is thought and said on a subject" nor "merely the views of the majority" and decide whether or not Katz's view, tailored to the needs of present-day empirical research, represents a shift in the way public opinion is conceptualized. In the next section, Kelman offers a potential resolution of the issue.

The Nature of Public Opinion

JAMES BRYCE

IN NO COUNTRY is public opinion so powerful as in the United States: in no country can it be so well studied. Before I proceed to describe how it works upon the government of the nation and the States, it may be proper to consider briefly how it is formed, and what is the nature of the influence which it everywhere exercises upon government.

What do we mean by public opinion? The difficulties which occur in discussing its action mostly arise from confounding opinion itself with the organs whence people try to gather it, and from using the term to denote, sometimes everybody's views,—that is, the aggregate of all that is thought and said on a subject,—sometimes merely the views of the majority, the particular type of thought and speech which prevails over other types.

The simplest form in which public opinion presents itself is when a sentiment spontaneously rises in the mind and flows from the lips of the average man upon his seeing or hearing something done or said. Homer presents this with his usual vivid directness in the line which frequently recurs in the *Iliad* when the effect produced by a speech or event is to be conveyed: "And thus any one was saying as he looked at his neighbour." This phrase describes what may be called the rudimentary stage of opinion. It is the prevalent impression of the moment. It is what any man (not every man) says, *i.e.* it is the natural and the general thought or wish which an occurrence evokes. But before opinion begins to tell upon government, it has to go through several other stages. These stages are various in different ages and countries. Let us try to note what they are in England or America at the present time, and how each stage grows out of the other.

A business man reads in his newspaper at breakfast the events of the

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preceding day. He reads that Prince Bismarck has announced a policy of protection for German industry, or that Mr. Henry George has been nominated for the mayoralty of New York. These statements arouse in his mind sentiments of approval or disapproval, which may be strong or weak according to his previous predilection for or against protection or Mr. Henry George and of course according to his personal interest in the matter. They rouse also an expectation of certain consequences likely to follow. Neither the sentiment nor the expectation is based on processes of conscious reasoning—our business man has not time to reason at breakfast—they are merely impressions formed on the spur of the moment. He turns to the leading article in the newspaper, and his sentiments and expectations are confirmed or weakened according as he finds that they are or are not shared by the newspaper writer. He goes down to his office in the train, talks there to two or three acquaintances, and perceives that they agree or do not agree with his own still faint impressions. In his counting-house he finds his partner and a bundle of other newspapers which he glances at; their words further affect him and thus by the afternoon his mind is beginning to settle down into a definite view, which approves or condemns Prince Bismarck's declaration or the nomination of Mr. George. Meanwhile a similar process has been going on in the minds of others, and particularly of the journalists, whose business it is to discover what people are thinking. The evening paper has collected the opinions of the morning papers, and is rather more positive in its forecast of results. Next day the leading journals have articles still more definite and positive in approval or condemnation and in prediction of consequences to follow; and the opinion of ordinary minds, hitherto fluid and undetermined, has begun to crystallize into a solid mass. This is the second stage. The debate and controversy begin. The men and the newspapers who approve Mr. George's nomination argue with those who do not; they find out who are friends and who opponents. The effect of controversy is to drive the partisans on either side from some of their arguments, which are shown to be weak; to confirm them in others, which they think strong; and to make them take up a definite position on one side. This is the third stage. The fourth is reached when action becomes necessary. When a citizen has to give a vote, he votes as a member of a party; his party prepossessions and party allegiance lay hold on him, and generally stifle any doubts or repulsion he may feel. Bringing men up to the polls is like passing a steam roller over stones newly laid on a road; the angularities are pressed down, and an appearance of smooth and even uniformity is given which did not exist before. When a man has voted, he is committed: he has thereafter an interest in backing the view which he has sought to make prevail. Moreover, opinions which may have been manifold till the polling, is thereafter generally twofold only. There is a view which has triumphed and a view which has been vanquished.

In examining the process by which opinion is formed, we cannot fail

to see how small a part of the view which the average man entertains when he goes to vote is really of his own making. His original impression was faint and perhaps shapeless: its present definiteness and strength are mainly due to what he has heard and read. He has been told what to think, and why to think it. Arguments have been supplied to him from without, and controversy has imbedded them in his mind. Although he supposes his view to be his own, he holds it rather because his acquaintances, his newspapers, his party leaders all hold it. His acquaintances do the like. Each man believes and repeats certain phrases, because he thinks that everybody else on his own side believes them, and of what each believes only a small part is his own original impression, the far larger part being the result of the commingling and mutual action and reaction of the impressions of a multitude of individuals, in which the element of pure personal conviction, based on individual thinking, is but small.

Every one is of course predisposed to see things in some one particular light by his previous education, habits of mind, accepted dogmas, religious or social affinities, notions of his own personal interest. No event, no speech or article, ever falls upon a perfectly virgin soil: the reader or listener is always more or less biased already. When some important event happens, which calls for the formation of a view, these pre-existing habits, dogmas, affinities, help to determine the impression which each man experiences, and so far are factors in the view he forms. But they operate chiefly in determining the first impression, and they operate over many minds at once. They do not produce variety and independence: they are soon overlaid by the influences which each man derives from his fellows, from his leaders, from the press.

Orthodox democratic theory assumes that every citizen has, or ought to have, thought out for himself certain opinions, *i.e.* ought to have a definite view, defensible by arguments, of what the country needs, of what principles ought to be applied in governing it, of the men to whose hands the government ought to be entrusted. There are persons who talk, though certainly very few who act, as if they believed this theory, which may be compared to the theory of some ultra-Protestants that every good Christian has or ought to have, by the strength of his own reason, worked out for himself from the Bible a system of theology. But one need only try the experiment of talking to that representative of public opinion whom the Americans call "the man in the cars," to realize how uniform opinion is among all classes of people, how little there is in the ideas of each individual of that individuality which they would have if he had formed them for himself, how little solidity and substance there is in the political or social beliefs of nineteen persons out of every twenty. These beliefs, when examined, mostly resolve themselves into two or three prejudices and aversions, two or three prepossessions for a particular leader or party or section of a party, two or three phrases or catchwords suggesting or embodying arguments which the man who repeats them has not analyzed. It is not that these nineteen persons are incapable

of appreciating good arguments, or are unwilling to receive them. On the contrary, and this is especially true of the working classes, an audience is pleased when solid arguments are addressed to it, and men read with more relish the articles or leaflets, supposing them to be smartly written, which contain the most carefully sifted facts and the most exact thought. But to the great mass of mankind in all places, public questions come in the third or fourth rank among the interests of life, and obtain less than a third or fourth of the leisure available for thinking. It is therefore rather sentiment than thought that the mass can contribute, a sentiment grounded on a few broad considerations and simple trains of reasoning; and the soundness and elevation of their sentiment will have more to do with their taking their stand on the side of justice, honour, and peace, than any reasoning they can apply to the sifting of the multifarious facts thrown before them, and to the drawing of the legitimate inferences therefrom.

It may be suggested that this analysis, if true of the uneducated, is not true of the educated classes. It is less true of that small class which in Europe especially occupies itself with politics; which, whether it reasons well or ill, does no doubt reason. But it is substantially no less applicable to the commercial and professional classes than to the working classes; for in the former, as well in the latter, one finds few persons who take the pains, or have the leisure, or indeed possess the knowledge, to enable them to form an independent judgment. The chief difference between the so-called upper, or wealthier, and the humbler strata of society is, that the former are less influenced by sentiment and possibly more influenced by notions, often erroneous, of their own interest. Having something to lose, they imagine dangers to their property or their class ascendancy. Moving in a more artificial society, their sympathies are less readily excited, and they more frequently indulge the tendency to cynicism natural to those who lead a life full of unreality and conventionalism.

The apparent paradox that where the humbler classes have differed in opinion from the higher, they have often been proved by the event to have been right and their so-called betters wrong (a fact sufficiently illustrated by the experience of many European countries during the last half-century) may perhaps be explained by considering that the historical and scientific data on which the solution of a difficult political problem depends are really just as little known to the wealthy as to the poor. Ordinary education, even the sort of education which is represented by a university degree, does not fit a man to handle these questions, and it sometimes fills him with a vain conceit of his own competence which closes his mind to argument and to the accumulating evidence of facts. Education ought, no doubt, to enlighten a man; but the educated classes, speaking generally, are the property-holding classes, and the possession of property does more to make a man timid than education does to make him hopeful. He is apt to underrate the power, as well as the worth of sentiment; he overvalues the restraints which existing institutions impose, he has a faint appreciation of the curative power of free

opinion, and of the tendency which brings things right when men have been left to their own devices, and have learnt from failure how to attain success. In the less-educated man a certain simplicity and openness of mind go some way to compensate for the lack of knowledge. He is more apt to be influenced by the authority of leaders; but as, at least in England and America, he is generally shrewd enough to discern between a great man and a demagogue, this is more a gain than a loss.

While suggesting these as explanations of the paradox, I admit that it remains a paradox. The paradox is not in the statement, however, but in the facts themselves. Nearly all great political and social causes have made their way first among the middle or humbler classes. The original impulse which has set the cause in motion, the inspiring ideas that have drawn men to it, have come from lofty and piercing minds, and minds generally belonging to the cultivated class. But the principles and precepts these minds have delivered have waxed strong because the common people received them gladly, while the wealthy and educated classes have frowned on or persecuted them. The most striking instance of all is to be found in the early history of Christianity.

The analysis, however, which I have sought to give of opinion applies only to the nineteen men out of twenty, and not to the twentieth. It applies to what may be called passive opinion—the opinion of those who have no special interest in politics, or concern with them beyond that of voting, of those who receive or propagate, but do not originate, views on public matters. Or, to put the same thing in different words, we have been considering how public opinion grows and spreads, as it were, spontaneously and naturally. But opinion does not merely grow; it is also made. There is not merely the passive class of persons; there is the active class, who occupy themselves primarily with public affairs, who aspire to create and lead opinion. The processes which these guides follow are too well known to need description. There are, however, one or two points which must be noted, in order to appreciate the reflex action of the passive upon the active class.

The man who tries to lead public opinion, be he statesman, journalist, or lecturer, finds in himself, when he has to form a judgment upon any current event, a larger measure of individual prepossession, and of what may be called political theory and doctrine, than belongs to the average citizen. His view is therefore likely to have more individuality, as well as more intellectual value. On the other hand, he has also a stronger motive than the average citizen for keeping in agreement with his friends and his party, because if he stands aloof and advances a view of his own, he may lose his influence and his position. He has a past, and is prevented, by the fear of seeming inconsistent, from departing from what he has previously said. He has a future, and dreads to injure it by severing himself ever so little from his party. He is accordingly driven to make the same sort of compromise between his individual tendencies and the general tendency which

the average citizen makes. But he makes it more consciously, realizing far more distinctly the difference between what he would think, say, and do, if left to himself, and what he says and does as a politician, who can be useful and prosperous only as a member of a body of persons acting together and professing to think alike.

Accordingly, though the largest part of the work of forming opinion is done by these men,—whom I do not call professional politicians, because in Europe many of them are not solely occupied with politics, while in America the name of professionals must be reserved for another class,—we must not forget the reaction constantly exercised upon them by the passive majority. Sometimes a leading statesman or journalist takes a line to which he finds that the mass of those who usually agree with him are not responsive. He perceives that they will not follow him, and that he must choose between isolation and a modification of his own views. A statesman may sometimes venture on the former course, and in very rare cases succeed in imposing his own will and judgment on his party. A journalist, however, is obliged to hark back if he has inadvertently taken up a position disagreeable to his *clientèle*, because the proprietors of the paper have their circulation to consider. To avoid so disagreeable a choice a statesman or a journalist is usually on the alert to sound the general opinion before he commits himself on a new issue. He tries to feel the pulse of the mass of average citizens; and as the mass, on the other hand, look to him for initiative, this is a delicate process. In European countries it is generally the view of the leaders which prevails, but it is modified by the reception which the mass give it; it becomes accentuated in the points which they appreciate; while those parts of it, or those ways of stating it, which have failed to find popular favour, fall back into the shade.

This mutual action and reaction of the makers or leaders of opinion upon the mass, and of the mass upon them, is the most curious part of the whole process by which opinion is produced. It is also that part in which there is the greatest difference between one free country and another. In some countries, the leaders count for, say, three-fourths of the product, and the mass for one-fourth only. In others these proportions are reversed. In some countries the mass of the voters are not only markedly inferior in education to the few who lead, but also diffident, more disposed to look up to their betters. In others the difference of intellectual level between those who busy themselves with politics and the average voter is far smaller. Perhaps the leader is not so well instructed a man as in the countries first referred to; perhaps the average voter is better instructed and more self-confident. Where both of these phenomena coincide, so that the difference of level is inconsiderable, public opinion will evidently be a different thing from what it is in countries where, though the Constitution has become democratic, the habits of the nation are still aristocratic. This is the difference between America and the countries of Western Europe.

Notes

It may be said that this has been so because the movements of the last half-century have been mostly movements in a democratic direction, which obtained the sympathy of the humbler classes because tending to break down the power and privilege which the upper classes previously enjoyed. This observation, however, does not meet all the cases, among which may be mentioned the attitude of the English working classes towards Italy from 1848 onwards, as well as their attitude in the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865, and in the Eastern Question from 1876 onwards, for in none of these instances had they any personal interest.