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CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

PHILIP E. CONVERSE

From the very outset in the 1930s, public opinion polling has been closely wedded to the study of popular democratic politics. The first issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* was produced in the rosy glow of the victory of the Gallup and Crossley polls over the *Literary Digest* and other "straw polls" in predicting the Roosevelt landslide over Landon in the 1936 presidential election, and featured an article by Archibald Crossley (1937) diagnosing this pivotal event. The same general survey research method may be used to explore the economist's "tastes and preferences," the psychologist's "attitudes," the sociologist's "norms," and the anthropologist's "cultural values," but the conventional label "public opinion" comes straight from the parlance of politics.

All this being so, a discussion of public opinion in politics is a subject nearly as vast as that of public opinion more broadly speaking. And a commission to discuss its changing conception over 50 years within a very brief essay is a sobering challenge. Surely one could winnow the relevant literature down to its most profound and influential decile, drop all annotations, and still have a mere bibliography on the subject that would well exceed our allotted space. Therefore we must discard to right and left all manner of indispensable topics and classic citations. What remains from such heroic selectivity is bound to be idiosyncratic: and it is only fair to point out that the reader is receiving here but a sample of one essay out of a large number of quite discrepant ones that might be written on the topic.

Once past this disclaimer, we may begin with a few of the broadest observations to be made. In retrospect, it seems clear in a degree that would delight William Fielding Ogburn that the growing intrenchment of the technology of public opinion assessment in the past 50 years has had a major impact not only on our understanding of detailed proper-

PHILIP E. CONVERSE is Robert C. Angell Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the University of Michigan, and Director of the Institute for Social Research. He is a co-author of *The American Voter, Elections and the Political Order,* and *The Quality of American Life and Political Representation in France.*

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ties and dynamics of opinion, but also on the conceptions which all of us hold—politician, scholar, and citizen alike—as to what "public opinion" is best taken to mean.

Definitions of Public Opinion

We do not necessarily speak of a total revolution in meaning here: surely there were some in the era before 1937 whose views as to the referent of the term *public opinion* would be quite congruent with those of today. But it is likely that this group was a distinct minority. A variety of meanings abounded, some of them in the same heads. What the firm establishment of a public opinion polling industry has done is to homogenize the definition and to stabilize it for the foreseeable future.

It is instructive to review what some of these alternative conceptions were in an earlier day. For many, public opinion was largely reducible to the views on public affairs held by those community notables who kept themselves informed and pondered on such matters at length. People whose attention to affairs of state was casual could not by this view be seen as making any meaningful contribution to the definition of public opinion on an issue. A similar but distinct view associated public opinion with particular interests: such opinion in a community was some integration over the views of the spokespersons for all of its major interest groups. Other views hinged on the assumption that public opinion was whatever certain community members like the local newspaper editor and some elected officials who could claim a finger on the public pulse articulated it to be, in accord with their sense of community interest.

As late as 1947, ten years into our half-century, the sociologist Herbert Blumer produced a most celebrated attack on the young industry of public opinion polling, arguing that the study of public opinion through polling had no scientific merit whatever, being intrinsically a non sequitur. The summation of individual opinions in "one person, one vote" style across a given jurisdiction in standard poll result form, Blumer argued, was exactly what public opinion was *not*. What it was instead was a kind of complex organic whole which mirrored the organization of society into functional groups, each hierarchically structured, between which exist complex communication patterns and interrelationships. The only entity worthy of the name of public opinion is something generated by interactions in such a structure and which is "effective" in the sense that people in positions of power judge it to be worth taking into account. Clearly a sample design which extracts unrelated individuals from the whole and assigns the opinion of each an

equal weight is a travesty on any "realistic" understanding of what the concept of public opinion means (Blumer, 1948).

There is nothing bizarre in the Blumer view of a more complex process in which public opinion is imbedded. What seems antiquarian is the insistence that the whole process of generation and impact of public opinion is a minimal definition of what it is; and that the mere summing of opinions in a sample of this or that political jurisdiction falls so wide of the conceptual target that it is at least misleading and for the most part quite irrelevant to any serious study of public opinion. But Blumer was not alone: a considerable audience, including many from academic social science, were applauding in the wings.

Therefore it is ironic that it is exactly this kind of "one person, one vote" tally of opinions as routinely reported today by polls and surveys which has now become the consensual understanding the world around as to a baseline definition of public opinion. Blumer recognized that much of his argument would be sidestepped if, as the operationists of the day were claiming, public opinion could be defined as whatever it is that opinion polls measured. Therefore he delivered very harsh words to inoculate against such a claim, pointing to the conceptual sterility of the operationist view. Today we might want to phrase the matter a little more carefully and say "public opinion is what opinion polls try to measure," or "what they measure with modest error." But for the most part we feel that there is a closer fit between our concept of public opinion and its conventional operationalization than is true in much of social science, and we are grateful for that fact. We probably are much more comfortable with it than with any generic posture of operationism, or with some of the companion claims of the same vintage, such as the one which said that intelligence was merely what the intelligence test measured.

It is equally ironic that the Blumer view contained seeds of its own destruction. Opinion did not deserve to be counted as public opinion, he felt, save as it surfaced in a public forum and thereby came to the respectful attention of some authority with power and influence. Since the stray views elicited by the pollster from a Dubuque housewife or a Florida carpenter had been induced artificially and might well never even be mentioned again by their authors, much less drawn forcefully to the attention of any authorities, such responses should be discarded before any estimate of public opinion is made. Yet it is now true that just such responses, elicited in just the same way and counted up with equal weights, are in fact brought forcefully to the attention of authorities at all levels of government. Indeed, many officials much of the time cannot wait to see the next round of data of this kind and regret the fact that they lack resources to buy more. Under such circumstances it is incontestable that one of Blumer's several tests to exclude

poll data as public opinion would now most resoundingly certify their claim to inclusion under that term.

Of course, the fact that a burgeoning polling industry started with a "one person, one vote" definition of opinion is also much less than an accident. To be sure, equal weighting of responses saved a whole step of calculation, and in the technology of the day this was of considerable moment. More to the point, there is reason to doubt that the original prime movers of the new enterprise would have accepted any other weighting had it been equally feasible to compute. Many of them were developing a new market research industry, and studies of political preferences produced publicity and hence were good business. But in addition, virtually all of the major figures before 1940—including George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley in the private sector, or Henry Wallace and Rensis Likert in the government at the Department of Agriculture—were strong on democratic principles and pleased to provide a means that the voice of the people might be more clearly heard to compete with the few voices in the ears of power that Blumer felt was all that public opinion could "realistically" be (Converse, 1987). It is this more populist definition which has of course prevailed.

Blumer was to lose on the scientific front as well as the political one. Polling was doomed first and foremost as a scientific enterprise, he argued, because it had never stopped to isolate public opinion as a generic concept. It had skipped that crucial step and just started measuring whatever came to hand. By a decade later it had become so engrossed in upgrading the quality of those measurement tools it had first grabbed mindlessly, that there was no longer hope its practitioners would ever go back to square one and reconsider what they needed to measure.

Again with the benefit of hindsight, it seems that Blumer did not entirely understand the scientific tune. There can be no doubt that public opinion is indeed imbedded in all of the complex sociopolitical processes which Blumer so ably summarized. But scientific procedure does not require, as he seemed to think, that we somehow digest such a huge and complex nexus in one swallow or forego the meal entirely. Quite to the contrary, it recommends that we proceed in small steps, decomposing the total process into more manageable parts, learning how to achieve some quantitative mastery over them, and only then beginning to recompose the whole to ask about the dynamics of interrelationships in the complex nexus.

For the study of public opinion, of course, the totality of responses in a jurisdiction equally weighted, i. e., the modern view of what public opinion is in all of its narrowness and firmness, is central fare. But there is nothing else that Blumer wished to take account of that is

thereby in any way irretrievably obscured. In fact, many things that he wished to settle a priori by assumption are now matters for much richer empirical assessment. He felt that a little advance thought would show that some opinions would have no political impact whatever, and hence should be discarded, or never gathered in the first place. We now construct analytic settings in which plausible measures of political impact can be defined and then we are able to try all manner of weightings of constituent opinion, starting with the equal-weight one, to test substantive hypotheses about the differential impact of some opinions over others. But we do this by test, rather than foreclose it by guess, which is much the better way.

In short, Blumer's definition of what public opinion is might better have been taken as an agenda for a few decades of research. And indeed, there is almost no wrinkle in the subject matter mentioned by Blumer, from the myriad sources of public opinion crystallization in social interaction to its ultimate impact on the political process, that has not been a matter of systematic study at one time or another. And while the richness of return from such probes has been very various, they all have contributed in a composite way to our conception of what public opinion is, in Blumer's fuller sense of complex process.

Growing Acceptance of Public Opinion Data

Any chronicle of the way in which our views of public opinion in the political process have changed in the past 50 years must encompass a tale of two communities: the public opinion researchers on one hand, and on the other, the "community" of political users, including most notably practicing politicians and their campaign advisors, but also other topical observers and interpreters such as political journalists.

It goes without saying that the political impact of public opinion data would be quite muffled indeed if politicians themselves gave such data no credence. It is equally obvious that acceptance of polling results was not instantaneous among such practitioners in the 1930s. To be sure, given the uncertainties of the political trade, almost any form of tea leaves or chicken entrails commanded avid interest among practitioners, and so did the early polls. But most politicians were wise enough not to fall for the proposition that a sample of 1,500 cases could say anything very reliable about opinion in a country of many millions of citizens.

Nor was this early skepticism entirely a matter of relative numbers, since samples of smaller jurisdictions, such as legislative districts, encountered resistance as well. For one thing, the new technology

threatened to topple one local priesthood and replace it with another. A time-honored prerogative of representatives to state and national bodies had been that of interpreting what their constituencies would and would not stand for. Almost halfway through our 50-year period, but well before district-level polling had become the style, Miller and Stokes (1963) asked a sample of candidates for the U.S. Congress how much of the time they thought that they knew how voters in their districts felt about major policy issues. Some 79% felt that they knew all or most of the time, a substantial level of confidence. Quite naturally, politicians who had spent many years in public service in their communities found it offensive to be told authoritatively what local opinion was by outsiders who hardly knew where the district was, much less anything about its geography, economy, or history.

One of the better ways to chart 50 years of steady growth in politician acceptance of public opinion data might be to examine trends in their willingness to pay for such results themselves rather than read them over somebody else's shoulder. Starting with the best-financed presidential candidacies 25 years ago but working downward progressively to more and more levels of office, a new vocation of campaign consultant has emerged with its roots in the special expertise of how to get polls done and how to read their results (Sabato, 1981). More recently, politician purchase of polling services has begun to broaden outside even the ever-extending periods of "campaign." The current apogee of this mounting tide of acceptance of public opinion data, populistically defined, is best symbolized by Richard Wirthlin's daily taking of the national pulse for the edification of the Reagan White House.

Of course, the acceptance of public opinion data as saying something meaningful about the total electorate, and the judicious interpretation of these data are two quite different things. Here the transfer of sophistication about these kinds of data from the research community to the user community is much more problematic and, normally, rather slow.

A few forms of research learning about political opinion have propagated to user circles with some speed. This is true of the more robust work on trends in opinion which are highly recurrent. After Mueller's (1973) discussion of regularities in presidential popularity ratings, users were rather quick to begin discussing the latest data about the current president in terms which were "seasonally adjusted" for position in the electoral cycle, and even appropriately discounted short-term effects of the "rally round the flag" type. Similarly, although the concept of "war fatigue" is of older vintage, there is probably a clearer sense now, due to poll data from the Korean and Vietnam wars, of some rather predictable turns in public enthusiasm as a function of length of

engagement and apparent success. For this type of finding, a deeper understanding of the meaning of public opinion numbers taken at any point in time has clearly increased, and quite painlessly so.

Other forms of learning about political opinion in the public tend, however, to have been absorbed more poorly by users, perhaps because the lessons themselves are fuzzier. This is undoubtedly why practitioners with enough resources hire interpreters. Without such help, these users seem to fall prey to three overriding difficulties. One is an excess faith in the precision of results. In some cases, even an accompanying caveat about sampling error seems disregarded; more commonly, there is remarkably little sensitivity to nonsampling sources of error. The other two difficulties involve an inappropriate reification of the results, lending them more homogeneity or stability than is usually wise.

Thus the user hearing about results on an opinion item tends to think of the two camps, pro and con, as monolithic blocs of pure types, whereas the experienced analyst is painfully aware of such overpowering heterogeneity within camps that the "camp" metaphor is itself usually stronger than is appropriate. This heterogeneity even intrudes to some degree on the question of whether camp membership has been properly self-assigned. The reasons underlying response choice tend to show a variety which the sophisticate is not always ready to accept and which the novitiate rarely can imagine; and there is often a fringe of reasons which do not even seem appropriate to the response chosen.

More broadly, however, the experienced analyst is likely to think of stratifications of public opinion which continue to differentiate respondents within each opinion camp. The broadest of these stratification dimensions have to do in a primary way with sharpness of opinion crystallization on the given issue, but more general secondary dimensions that are usually kept in mind include variations from high to low in political interest, item-specific information, and broader contextual sophistication about the political world. These lines of differentiation tend, of course, to be somewhat correlated; but the correlations are usually modest, and wisdom requires keeping several potential dimensions in mind at once, a task that the outsider finds especially difficult.

Finally, the outsider usually displays a poor feel for the continuity and changeability of discovered opinion distributions. The commonest error, as it seems to us, is to see such results as more graven in stone than the analyst is likely to intuit. This is especially true, of course, around opinion on emergent new issues or political candidacies. On the other hand, some naivete arises in the opposite direction, whereby the practitioner optimistically thinks of certain opinions as subject to effective manipulation, or at least change through sufficiently dramatic events, when the analyst has reason to think otherwise.

Alarm as to this latter score undoubtedly lay behind the Yankelovich suggestion that distributions reported for specific opinions might usefully be accompanied by further measurements called a "Mushiness Index." The particulars of the proposal have not caught on, and the elaboration of each root opinion measure with an array of stability probes entails a kind of expense that few would be willing to pay in any event. But the proposal itself reflects a concern which is surely widespread in the analyst community.

Two Faces of Public Opinion

For the first decade or two of public opinion measurement, populist style, many found it refreshing to be supplied with frequent peeks at what the whole adult population actually thought about political issues and candidates, rather than having this defined, often in suspiciously contradictory fashion, by politicians, pundits, and other voyeurs. This seemed to be a new purchase on reality which was much to be welcomed.

At the same time, particularly as the 1960s wore on, there were points at which disjunctures of startling proportions seemed to grow up between what one read in the published results of opinion surveys and what one sensed in the public opinion "atmospherics" picked up in fulfilling the normal adult daily requirement of political news.

This first became painful for us as monitors of public opinion in the period leading up to the 1964 presidential campaign. One of the main new forces of considerable strength emerging on the national scene in that period was the John Birch Society. This society began to define with great vigor a new political agenda for the United States contesting the hegemony of the New Deal ideology; and at a much more practical level, it also contributed much of the planning and organizational muscle that captured the 1964 presidential nomination for Barry Goldwater.

All of this was potent stuff, and scholars young enough to have faith in the wonders of the new public opinion technology flocked to our 1964 national election study in order to study the new "radical right." In particular, they most wanted to examine the attributes of John Birch Society members. When they discovered that there was at most one in the whole study, there was a certain sense of outrage. How could we have drawn such an impossibly rotten sample? When we reviewed for them the sheer numbers situation with respect to estimates of John Birch Society membership and the very feeble probability that an impeccable national sample of conventional size would contain as many as two Birch Society members, the exasperation broadened. What did

it mean to say that we were studying public opinion by definitive methods when these methods could not even be expected in principle to detect the main development in popular grass-roots politics for the whole interelection (1960–64) period? Blumer would have been pleased at this consternation. True enough, public opinion as measured by sample surveys and public opinion "effective" in the political arena, while often reasonably convergent, are hardly the same thing and can at times diverge remarkably.

This lesson was merely intensified as the 1960s wore on. Between the ferment on the streets surrounding the civil rights movement, the opposition to the war in Vietnam, and the flowering of the counter-culture, media coverage left the impression of a countryside which was up in arms against the policies of the mainstream establishment. Some of these oppositions, such as an advance in disgruntlement about the Vietnam involvement after the Tet offensive in 1968, could indeed be found in public opinion data. They were, however, rarely as large as many presumed from the media events of the period, and some apparent tributaries to the wave of discontent could not be discerned at all. The beleaguered Nixon Administration popularized the phrase "the silent majority" to dramatize the disjuncture between what one read in the media and what one read in the polls or, for that matter, in election returns which tended appropriately to be much less displeasing to the administration than was the popular ferment in the streets.

Blumer would have had us go directly to the measurement of public opinion in the politically effective sense. This would certainly have spared us major consternation at some of these disjunctures, since they would have been concealed by procedure. On the other hand, not only was Blumer unable to suggest feasible ways of isolating politically effective opinion from a standing start; we also would have been the poorer intellectually not to have suffered the tensions between populist opinion measurement and actual political outcomes. A great deal of important social science lies in developing a keener understanding of what stands between the two.

There are usually rival hypotheses. One of the abiding and hence most notorious disjunctures between populist opinion and the policy outputs of representative bodies in the United States involves the issue of gun control. For decades about three-quarters of the American public have favored the establishment of some gun control measures, but very little legislation has responded to this demand locally, and none nationally. The sense of disjuncture is heightened by the fact that in some states gun control referenda have been held and the proposed measures voted down at the polls while poll results for the same states show majorities still favorable. It has often been imagined that opponents of gun control, while a minority, are a passionate one.

Schuman and Presser (1981) have shown for the national population that standard measures of attitude strength fail to show any notable differences in this predicted direction between gun control proponents and opponents. At the same time, opponents were about three times as likely to have written letters or given money to strengthen their side of the dispute than supporters were. Thus it seems clear that there is a whole intervening level of differential mobilization phenomena accounting not only for asymmetric lobbying in the halls of legislatures but also for major discrepancies in turnout at the polls when referenda on gun control are mounted.

The simplest lesson in all of these examples is, of course, that effective opinion can upon occasions depart widely from populist opinion. It may be surprising that it does not do so more often. A second lesson is that such disjunctures are natural. They have a meaning of their own, and cannot be taken to show that somehow either form of opinion has been incorrectly assessed, provided we keep in mind what each version addresses and fails to address. What one makes of the discrepancy in normative terms, of course, cannot be solved empirically.

The Policy Impact of Public Opinion

We have now reviewed, in cameo form, developments in the past half-century in global definitions as to what public opinion is; the growing acceptance in practicing political circles of the kind of populist measurement which has burgeoned in this period; and some of the chief inadequacies of these simple numbers, particularly with regard to the complicated texture of the attitudinal structures they summarize and because they sometimes show major disjunctures with actual political outcomes. Let us close with a few observations on aspects of this topic which are most important but also the most nebulous: how much influence in real-life political process can be claimed for public opinion as currently measured, and is this a good thing?

We have notorious difficulty across the social sciences assigning any very precise values to "influence" or "impact" if the term is intended causally. In addition, any answers as to whether there is a lot of influence or a little are greatly tossed about by expectations and normative predispositions of the observer, as well as idiosyncratic definitions of what influence consists of in this context. If we restrict our definition of influence to instances in which a political representative is a blank slate until s/he learns what public opinion is on an issue and then runs like an automaton to implement this public will, then there is probably little influence which occurs.

If, on the other hand, any deflection whatever of behavior by the

representative which arises as a result of some exposure to poll data, even the most vague "taking account of it," classifies as an instance of actual influence, then of course public opinion in poll form must be said to have a great deal of influence. And this kind of minimal influence must occur in very large doses among political practitioners, or it would be extremely hard to explain why such users pay many millions of dollars a year for this expensive class of information.

Much of the use of such information by practicing politicians has a tactical and defensive flavor to it. There is large-scale and repetitive evidence as to the degree to which political representatives are preoccupied with maximizing their chances of election or reelection (e.g., Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978). Against the backdrop of these concerns, acquiring relevant public opinion data is not unlike the riverboat captain buying the latest mapping of sandbar configurations before embarking on a voyage. Few politicians consult poll data to find out what they should be thinking on the issues, or to carry out errands. But they have very little interest in flouting the will of their constituency in any tendentious, head-on way. Such data give them a sense of what postures to emphasize and avoid. The whole consultation process is a delicate process of mutual adjustment and accommodation between the revealed opinion of constituents and one's own convictions. The results of this accommodation are rarely seen in responses that are dramatically out of character for the representative; but it is hard to deny that a good deal of influence, a great deal of it subtle, some less so, is taking place.

Case studies abound which hint at the scope of this influence in the modern period, even involving such momentous decisions as that of Lyndon Johnson not to stand for reelection in 1968. Quantitative studies of larger scope have measured the degree of congruence between popular opinion and the policy outcomes of the political process in a variety of contexts (e.g., Miller and Stokes, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1972; Page and Shapiro, 1983). None of these studies show perfect congruence, if there is any reason to expect such. But they all show a considerable degree of it.

Of course, this is mere congruence, and direct causal influence from public opinion to representative cannot be guaranteed, any more than it can for any other garden-variety correlation. At the same time it seems gratuitous to refuse to believe that any of the observed congruence arises through the mechanisms of actual popular control, simply because of the difficulty of airtight demonstration. Surely those studies capable of examining potential congruence between popular will and personal predilection contrasted across candidates competing for representative roles tend to show that winners display much higher congruence with their districts than losers do. Here the causal mechanism

producing a legislature of winners rather than losers is incontrovertible in a democracy: it is popular selection at the polls.

The same studies which show such congruence also hint that fidelity of representation is a variable quantity from one issue area to another, from one time to the next, and from one level of government or representational institution to another. There is nothing frightening about this variability, since it usually follows rather common-sense lines. But it does suggest that any omnibus question as to the influence of public opinion on political outcomes is difficult to answer in part because it is too simplistic.

Something of the same can be said for the question as to whether we are better off in an era when there is some external validation as to how public opinion is registering on particular issues at particular times for particular populations, relative to eras in which such assessments had more the flavor of the projective test. Much of the answer will and should depend on whether one's democratic philosophies lean more toward direct and populist democracy or toward indirect representation. By the same token, personal answers are likely to vary sharply according to whether one's sympathies have more often been with actual elite policy directions or with public opinion data, when the two conflict.

As we write in July 1987 the Iran–Contra hearings are in their late stages. After Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North had chastised the members of Congress for failing to support the Contra resistance in Nicaragua, Senator Warren Rudman chastised him in turn, pointing out that public opinion polls had been running 75–25 against support for the Contras. He indicated that Congress had been appropriately reflecting this public sentiment, and concluded with some vehemence that North must understand that "the American people have a Constitutional right to be wrong."

At the half-century mark for serious public opinion measurement, this episode carries several lessons. First, it is significant that nobody challenged the accuracy of the public opinion figures. Secondly, nobody challenged Rudman's claim of basic authority for the voice of the public. What was challenged in subsequent discussions by the committee and in the media was the obligation of the members of Congress to follow public opinion they considered erroneous, as opposed to exercising "leadership" to draw policy in another direction.

This normative difference we will always have with us. Moreover, since few would care to argue that the public is always right, or even right much more than half the time, it is not easy to demonstrate that a greater sensitivity to public opinion populist style has necessarily improved the quality of governance in the republic.

It seems safe, however, to posit one major gain consolidated in the

past 50 years. In the degree that values propel us to take sober account of the opinion of all the people in forming policy outcomes—and they surely propel most of us a good distance in this direction—we might as well get a reasonably accurate reading of that opinion rather than entrusting it to a few local experts to guess at it. In this regard, at least, we now seem a satisfying 50 years ahead of where we were before.

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