# Public Opinion

Public Opinion, an aggregate of the individual views, attitudes, and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a significant proportion of a community. Some scholars treat the aggregate as a synthesis of the views of all or a certain segment of society; others regard it as a collection of many differing or opposing views. Writing in 1918, the **American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley** emphasized public opinion as

- a process of interaction and mutual influence rather than a state of broad agreement.

**The American political scientist V.O. Key defined public opinion in 1961 as**

- "Opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed."

Subsequent advances in statistical and demographic analysis led by the 1990s to an understanding of public opinion as the collective view of a defined population, such as a particular demographic or ethnic group.

The influence of public opinion is not restricted to politics and elections. It is a powerful force in many other spheres, such as culture, fashion, literature and the arts, consumer spending, and marketing and public relations.

# Theoretical and practical conceptions

In his eponymous treatise on public opinion published in 1922, the American editorialist **Walter Lippmann** qualified his observation that:

**Democracies tend to make a mystery out of public opinion with the declaration that "there have been skilled organizers of opinion who understood the mystery well enough to create majorities on election day."**

Although the reality of public opinion is now almost universally accepted, there is much variation in the way it is defined, reflecting in large measure the different perspectives from which scholars have approached the subject. Contrasting understandings of public opinion have taken shape over the centuries, especially as new methods of measuring public opinion have been applied to politics, commerce, religion, and social activism.

Political scientists and some historians have tended to emphasize the role of public opinion in government and politics, paying particular attention to its influence on the development of government policy. Indeed, **some political scientists have regarded public opinion as equivalent to the national will.** In such a limited sense, however, there can be only one public opinion on an issue at any given time.

**Sociologists,** in contrast, usually conceive of public opinion as a product of social interaction and communication. **According to this view,** there can be no public opinion on an issue unless members of the public communicate with each other. Even if their individual opinions are quite similar to begin with, their beliefs will

not constitute a public opinion until they are conveyed to others in some form, whether through television, radio, e-mail, social media, print media, phone, or in-person conversation. Sociologists also point to the possibility of there being many different public opinions on a given issue at the same time. Although one body of opinion may dominate or reflect government policy, for example, this does not preclude the existence of other organized bodies of opinion on political topics. The sociological approach also recognizes the importance of public opinion in areas that have little or nothing to do with government. The very nature of public opinion, according to the American researcher Irving Crespi, is to be interactive, multidimensional, and continuously changing. Thus, fads and fashions are appropriate subject matter for students of public opinion, as are public attitudes toward celebrities or corporations.

Nearly all scholars of public opinion, regardless of the way they may define it, agree that, in order for a phenomenon to count as public opinion, at least four conditions must be satisfied: (1) there must be an issue, (2) there must be a significant number of individuals who express opinions on the issue, (3) at least some of these opinions must reflect some kind of a consensus, and (4) this consensus must directly or indirectly exert influence.

In contrast to scholars, those who aim to influence public opinion are less concerned with theoretical issues than with the practical problem of shaping the opinions of specified "publics," such as employees, stockholders, neighbourhood associations, or any other group whose actions may affect the fortunes of a client or stakeholder. Politicians and publicists, for example, seek ways to influence voting and purchasing decisions, respectively—hence their wish to determine any attitudes and opinions that may affect the desired behaviour.

It is often the case that opinions expressed in public differ from those expressed in private. Some views—even though widely shared—may not be expressed at all. Thus, in an authoritarian or totalitarian state, a great many people may be opposed to the government but may fear to express their attitudes even to their families and friends. In such cases, an anti-government public opinion necessarily fails to develop.

# The formation and change of public opinion

No matter how collective views (those held by most members of a defined public) coalesce into public opinion, the result can be self-perpetuating. The French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, observed that once an opinion

> *has taken root among a democratic people and established itself in the minds of the bulk of the community, it afterwards persists by itself and is maintained without effort, because no one attacks it.*

In 1993 the German opinion researcher Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann characterized this phenomenon as a "spiral of silence," noting that people who perceive that they hold a minority view will be less inclined to express it in public.

# Components of public opinion: attitudes and values

How many people actually form opinions on a given issue, as well as what sorts of opinions they form, depends partly on their immediate situations, partly on more-general social-environmental factors, and partly on their pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, and values. Because attitudes and values play such a crucial role in the development of public opinion, scholars of the subject are naturally interested in the nature of these phenomena, as well as in ways to assess their variability and intensity.

The concepts of opinion, attitude, and value used in public opinion research were given an influential metaphorical characterization by the American-born political analyst Robert Worcester, who founded the London-based polling firm MORI (Market & Opinion Research International Ltd.). Values, he suggested, are “the deep tides of public mood, slow to change, but powerful.” Opinions, in contrast, are “the ripples on the surface of the public’s consciousness—shallow and easily changed.” Finally, attitudes are “the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger,” representing a midrange between values and opinions. According to Worcester, the art of understanding public opinion rests not only on the measurement of people’s views but also on understanding the motivations behind those views.

No matter how strongly they are held, attitudes are subject to change if the individuals holding them learn of new facts or perspectives that challenge their earlier thinking. This is especially likely when people learn of a contrary position held by an individual whose judgment they respect. This course of influence, known as “opinion leadership,” is frequently utilized by publicists as a means of inducing people to reconsider—and quite possibly change—their own views.

Some opinion researchers have contended that the standard technical concept of attitude is not useful for understanding public opinion, because it is insufficiently complex. Crespi, for example, preferred to speak of “attitudinal systems,” which he characterized as the combined development of four sets of phenomena:

**(1) values and interests,**

**(2) knowledge and beliefs,**

**(3) feelings, and**

**(4) behavioural intentions (i.e., conscious inclinations to act in certain ways).**

Perhaps the most important concept in public opinion research is that of values. Values are of considerable importance in determining whether people will form opinions on a particular topic; in general, they are more likely to do so when they perceive that their values require it. Values are adopted early in life, in many cases from parents and schools. They are not likely to change, and they strengthen as people grow older. They encompass beliefs about religion—including belief (or disbelief) in God— political outlook, moral standards, and the like. As Worcester’s analogy suggests, values are relatively resistant to ordinary attempts at persuasion and to influence by the media, and they rarely shift as a result of positions or arguments expressed in a single debate. Yet they can be shaped—and in some cases completely changed—by prolonged exposure to conflicting values, by concerted thought and discussion, by the feeling that one is “out of step” with others

whom one knows and respects, and by the development of significantly new evidence or circumstances.

## Formation of attitudes

Once an issue is generally recognized, some people will begin to form attitudes about it. If an attitude is expressed to others by sufficient numbers of people, a public opinion on the topic begins to emerge. Not all people will develop a particular attitude about a public issue; some may not be interested, and others simply may not hear about it.

The attitudes that are formed may be held for various reasons. Thus, among people who oppose higher property taxes, one group may be unable to afford them, another may wish to deny additional tax revenues to welfare recipients, another may disagree with a certain government policy, and another may wish to protest what it sees as wasteful government spending. A seemingly homogeneous body of public opinion may therefore be composed of individual opinions that are rooted in very different interests and values. If an attitude does not serve a function such as one of the above, it is unlikely to be formed: an attitude must be useful in some way to the person who holds it.

## Factors influencing public opinion

## Environmental factors

Environmental factors play a critical part in the development of opinions and attitudes. Most pervasive is the influence of the social environment: family, friends, neighbourhood, place of work, religious community, or school. People usually adjust their attitudes to conform to those that are most prevalent in the social groups to which they belong. Researchers have found, for example, that if someone in the United States who is liberal becomes surrounded at home or at work by people who profess conservatism, that person is more likely to start voting for conservative candidates than is a liberal whose family and friends are also liberal. Similarly, it was found during World War II that men in the U.S. military who transferred from one unit to another often adjusted their opinions to conform more closely to those of the unit to which they were transferred.

## Mass media and social media

Newspapers and news and opinion Web sites, social media, radio, television, e-mail, and blogs are significant in affirming attitudes and opinions that are already established. The U.S. news media, having become more partisan in the first two decades of the 21st century, have focused conservative or liberal segments of the public on certain personalities and issues and generally reinforced their audience's preexisting political attitudes.

Mass media and social media can also affirm latent attitudes and "activate" them, prompting people to take action. Just before an election, for example, voters who earlier had only a mild preference for one party or candidate may be inspired by media coverage not only to take the trouble to vote but perhaps also to contribute money or to help a party organization in some other way.

Mass media and social media, to varying extents, play another important role by letting individuals know what other people think and by giving political leaders large audiences. In this way the media make it possible for public opinion to encompass large numbers of individuals and wide geographic areas. It appears, in fact, that in some European countries the growth of broadcasting, especially television, affected the operation of the parliamentary system. Before television, national elections were seen largely as contests between a number of candidates or parties for parliamentary seats. As the electronic media grew more sophisticated technologically, elections increasingly assumed the appearance of a personal struggle between the leaders of the principal parties concerned. In the United States, presidential candidates have come to personify their parties. Once in office, a president can easily appeal to a national audience over the heads of elected legislative representatives.

In areas where the mass media are thinly spread or where access to social media is limited, as in developing countries or in countries where print and electronic media are strictly controlled, word of mouth can sometimes perform the same functions as the press and broadcasting, though on a more limited scale. In developing countries, it is common for those who are literate to read from newspapers to those who are not or for large numbers of persons to gather around the village radio or a community television. Word of mouth in the marketplace or neighbourhood then carries the information farther. In countries where important news is suppressed by the government, a great deal of information is transmitted by rumour. Word of mouth (or other forms of person-to-person communication, such as text messaging) thus becomes the vehicle for underground public opinion in authoritarian or totalitarian countries, even though these processes are slower and usually involve fewer people than in countries where the media network is dense and uncontrolled.

## Interest groups

Interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, and labour unions (trade unions) cultivate the formation and spread of public opinion on issues of concern to their constituencies. These groups may be concerned with political, economic, or ideological issues, and most work through the mass media and social media as well as by word of mouth. Some of the larger or more affluent interest groups around the world make use of advertising and public relations. One increasingly popular tactic is the informal poll or straw vote. In this approach, groups ask their members and supporters to “vote”—usually via text messaging or on Web sites—in unsystematic “polls” of public opinion that are not carried out with proper sampling procedures. Multiple votes by supporters are often encouraged, and, once the group releases its findings to credible media outlets, it claims legitimacy by citing the publication of its poll in a recognized newspaper or other news source.

Reasons for conducting unscientific polls range from their entertainment value to their usefulness in manipulating public opinion, especially by interest groups or issue-specific organizations, some of which exploit straw-poll results as a means of making their causes appear more significant than they actually are. On any given issue, however, politicians will weigh the relatively disinterested opinions and attitudes of the majority against the committed values of smaller but more-dedicated groups for whom retribution at the ballot box is more likely.

## Opinion leaders

Opinion leaders play a major role in defining popular issues and in influencing individual opinions regarding them. Political leaders in particular can turn a relatively unknown problem into a national issue if they decide to call attention to it in the media. One of the ways in which opinion leaders rally opinion and smooth out differences among those who are in basic agreement on a subject is by inventing symbols or coining slogans: in the words of U.S. Pres. Woodrow Wilson, the Allies in World War I were fighting "a war to end all wars," while aiming "to make the world safe for democracy"; post-World War II relations with the Soviet Union were summed up in the term "Cold War," first used by U.S. presidential adviser Bernard Baruch in 1947. Once enunciated, symbols and slogans are frequently kept alive and communicated to large audiences via the mass media and social media and may become the cornerstone of public opinion on any given issue.

Opinion leadership is not confined to prominent figures in public life. An opinion leader can be any person to whom others look for guidance on a certain subject. Thus, within a given social group one person may be regarded as especially well-informed about local politics, another as knowledgeable about foreign affairs, and another as expert in real estate. These local opinion leaders are generally unknown outside their own circle of friends and acquaintances, but their cumulative influence in the formation of public opinion is substantial.

## Complex influences

Because psychological makeup, personal circumstances, and external influences all play a role in the formation of each person's opinions, it is difficult to predict how public opinion on an issue will take shape. The same is true with regard to changes in public opinion. Some public opinions can be explained by specific events and circumstances, but in other cases the causes are more elusive. (Some opinions, however, are predictable: the public's opinions about other countries, for example, seem to depend largely on the state of relations between the governments involved. Hostile public attitudes do not cause poor relations—they are the result of them.)

People presumably change their own attitudes when they no longer seem to correspond with prevailing circumstances and, hence, fail to serve as guides to action. Similarly, a specific event, such as a natural disaster or a human tragedy, can heighten awareness of underlying problems or concerns and trigger changes in public opinion. Public opinion about the environment, for instance, has been influenced by single events such as the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962; by the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986 (*see* Chernobyl accident); by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's 1988 address to the Royal Society on a number of environmental topics, including global warming; by the accidental spill from the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* in 1989; and by the Academy Award-winning documentary on climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth*, in 2006. It is nonetheless the case that whether a body of public opinion on a given issue is formed and sustained depends to a significant extent on the attention it receives in the mass media.

# Political polls

Polls conducted on the eve of the voting day have been successful in forecasting election results in most cases in which they have been used for this purpose. Some notable failures occurred in the United States in the presidential election of 1948 (when nearly all polls forecast a Republican victory and the Democrat won) and the presidential election of 2016 (when nearly all polls forecast a Democratic victory and the Republican won) and in Great Britain in 1970 (when all but one of the major polls incorrectly predicted a Labour Party victory) and again in 1992 (when all polls incorrectly predicted a hung parliament). Professional opinion researchers point out that predicting elections is always uncertain, because of the possibility of last-minute shifts of opinion and unexpected turnouts on voting day; nevertheless, their record has been good over the years in nearly every country.

Although popular attention has been focused on polls taken before major elections, most polling is devoted to other subjects, and university-based opinion researchers usually do not make election forecasts at all. Support for opinion studies comes largely from public agencies, foundations, and commercial firms, which are interested in questions such as how well people's health, educational, and other needs are being satisfied, how problems such as racial prejudice and drug addiction should be addressed, and how well a given industry is meeting public demands. Polls that are regularly published usually have to do with some lively social issue—and elections are included only as one of many subjects of interest. It is estimated that, in any country where polls are conducted for publication, electoral polling represents no more than 2 percent of the work carried out by survey researchers in that country.