Public Opinion

Public Opinion, an <u>aggregate</u> of the individual views, attitudes, and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a significant proportion of a <u>community</u>. 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 <u>Charles Horton Cooley</u>** 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.

<u>Sociologists,</u> in contrast, usually conceive of public opinion as a product of <u>social interaction</u> and <u>communication</u>. **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.

Historical background

Antiquity

Although the term *public opinion* was not used until the 18th century, phenomena that closely resemble public opinion seem to have occurred in many historical epochs. The ancient histories of **Babylonia and Assyria**, for example, **contain references to popular attitudes, including the legend of a caliph who would disguise himself and mingle with the people to hear what they said about his governance.** The prophets of ancient Israel sometimes justified the policies of the government to the people and sometimes appealed to the people to oppose the government. In both cases, they were concerned with [swaying](#) the opinion of the crowd. And **in the classical democracy of Athens**, it was commonly observed that **everything depended on the people, and the people were dependent on the word.** Wealth, fame, and respect—all could be given or taken away by persuading the populace. By contrast **[Plato](#) found little of value in public opinion,** since he believed that society

should be governed by philosopher-kings whose wisdom far exceeded the knowledge and intellectual capabilities of the general population. And while Aristotle stated that "he who loses the support of the people is a king no longer," the public he had in mind was a very select group, being limited to free adult male citizens; in the Athens of his time, the voting population probably represented only 10 to 15 percent of the city's population.

The Middle Ages to the early modern period

In the traditional rural European societies of the Middle Ages, most people's activities and attitudes were dictated by their social stations. Phenomena much like public opinion, however, could still be observed among the religious, intellectual, and political elite. Religious disputations, the struggles between popes and the Holy Roman Empire, and the dynastic ambitions of princes all involved efforts to persuade, to create a following, and to line up the opinions of those who counted. In 1191 the English statesman William Longchamp, bishop of Ely, was attacked by his political opponents for hiring troubadours to extol his merits in public places, so that "people spoke of him as though his equal did not exist on earth." The propaganda battles between emperors and popes were waged largely through sermons, but handwritten literature also played a part.

From the end of the 13th century, the ranks of those who could be drawn into controversy regarding current affairs grew steadily. The general level of education of the lay population gradually increased. The rise of humanism in Italy led to the emergence of a group of writers whose services were eagerly sought by princes striving to consolidate their domains. Some of these writers served as advisers and diplomats; others were employed as publicists because of their rhetorical skills. The 16th-century Italian writer Pietro Aretino—of whom it was said that he knew how to defame, to threaten, and to flatter better than all others—was sought by both Charles V of Spain and Francis I of France. The Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, a contemporary of Aretino, wrote that princes should not ignore popular opinion, particularly in regard to such matters as the distribution of offices.

The invention of printing from movable type in the 15th century and the Protestant Reformation in the 16th further increased the numbers of people able to hold and express informed opinions on contemporary issues. The German priest and scholar Martin Luther broke with the humanists by abandoning the use of Classical Latin, which was intelligible only to the educated, and turned directly to the masses. "I will gladly leave to others the honour of doing great things," he wrote, "and will not be ashamed of preaching and writing in German for the unschooled layman." Although Luther's Ninety-five Theses, which were distributed throughout Europe despite being printed against his will, were of a theological nature, he also wrote on such subjects as the war against the Turks, the Peasants' Revolt, and the evils of usury. His vituperative style and the criticism he received from his many opponents, both lay and clerical, contributed to the formation of larger and larger groups holding opinions on important matters of the day.

During the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), extensive attempts were made to create and influence public opinion, including the use of tracts illustrated with woodcuts.

Opinions were also swayed by means of **speeches, sermons, and face-to-face discussions**. Not surprisingly, some civil and religious authorities attempted to control the dissemination of unwelcome ideas through increasingly strict censorship. The first *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* ("Index of Forbidden Books") was published during the reign of Pope Paul IV in 1559. Charles IX of France decreed in 1563 that nothing could be printed without the special permission of the king. The origin of the word *propaganda* is linked to the Roman Catholic Church's missionary organization Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith), which was founded in 1622.

More quietly but more significantly, other means of distributing information were becoming a common part of life. Regular postal services, started in France in 1464 and in the Austrian Empire in 1490, facilitated the spread of information enormously. Rudimentary private news services had been maintained by political authorities and wealthy merchants since Classical times, but they were not available to the general public. Regularly printed newspapers first appeared about 1600 and multiplied rapidly thereafter, though they were frequently bedeviled by censorship regulations.

The great European news centres began to develop during the 17th century, especially in cities that were establishing sophisticated financial exchanges, such as Antwerp, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, London, and Lyons. With the introduction of a paid civil service and the employment of paid soldiers in the place of vassals, princes found it necessary to borrow money. The bankers, in turn, had to know a great deal about the credit of the princes, the state of their political fortunes, and their reputations with their subjects. All kinds of political and economic information flowed to the money-lending centres, and this information gave rise to generally held opinions in the banking community; the *ditta di borsa* ("opinion on the bourse") is often referred to in documents of the period.

The 18th century to the present

Significantly, it was another financial official who first popularized the term *public opinion* in modern times. Jacques Necker, the finance minister for Louis XVI on the eve of the French Revolution, noted repeatedly in his writings that public credit depended upon the opinions of holders and buyers of government securities about the viability of the royal administration. He too was vitally concerned with the *ditta di borsa*. But he also remarked on the power of public opinion in other areas. "This public opinion," Necker wrote, "strengthens or weakens all human institutions." As he saw it, public opinion should be taken into account in all political undertakings. Necker was not, however, concerned with the opinions of each and every Frenchman. For him, the people who collectively shaped public opinion were those who could read and write, who lived in cities, who kept up with the day's news, and who had money to buy government securities.

The final years of the 18th century showed how enormously the power of public opinion had grown. Revolutionary public opinion had transformed 13 North American British colonies into the United States of America. In France, public opinion had inspired both the middle classes and the urban masses and had ultimately taken shape as the French Revolution. Observers of the Revolution were mystified—and often terrified—by this new spectre, which seemed able to sweep aside one of the most-entrenched institutions of the time—the monarchy.

In keeping with theories of social class developed in the 19th century, some scholars of the era viewed public opinion as the domain of the upper classes. Thus, the English author William A. Mackinnon defined it as "that sentiment on any given subject which is entertained by the best informed, most intelligent, and most moral persons in the community." Mackinnon, who was one of the first authors to focus on the subject, drew a further distinction between public opinion and "popular clamour," which he described as

> *that sort of feeling arising from the passions of a multitude acting without consideration; or an excitement created amongst the uneducated; or amongst those who do not reflect, or do not exercise their judgment on the point in question.*

There is no doubt that public opinion was on the minds of the great thinkers and writers of the era. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel described public opinion as containing both truth and falsehood and added that it was the task of the great man to distinguish between the two. The English jurist and historian James Bryce, writing in the late 19th and the early 20th century, maintained that a government based on popular consent would give a nation great stability and strength but did not believe that public opinion could or should determine the details of policy, since in his view most people do not have the leisure or inclination to arrive at a position on every question. Rather, the masses would set the general tone for policy, their sentiments leading them to take a stand on the side of justice, honour, and peace.

Various theories of public opinion have been developed since the early 20th century, though none has been recognized as predominant. According to a framework suggested by the Canadian communications theorist Sherry Devereux Ferguson, most of them fall into one or the other of three general categories. Some theories proposed in the first half of the 20th century treat public opinion as a welling up from the bottom levels of society to the top, ensuring a two-way flow of communication between representatives and the represented. This "populist" approach acknowledges the tendency of public opinion to shift as individuals interact with each other or respond to media influences. It has been opposed by theories of the "elitist" or social constructionist category, which emphasize the manipulative aspects of communication and recognize the multiplicity of perspectives that tend to form around any issue. Reflecting a more pessimistic outlook, theories belonging to a third category, known as critical or radical-functionalist, hold that the general public—including minority groups—has negligible influence on public opinion, which is largely controlled by those in power.

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.

Some changes in public opinion have been difficult for experts to explain. During the second half of the 20th century in many parts of the world, attitudes toward religion, family, sex, international relations, social welfare, and the economy underwent major shifts. Although important issues have claimed public attention in all these areas, the scope of change in public attitudes and opinions is difficult to attribute to any major event or even to any complex of events.

Public opinion and government

By its very nature, the democratic process spurs citizens to form opinions on a number of issues. Voters are called upon to choose candidates in elections, to consider constitutional amendments, and to approve or reject municipal taxes and other legislative proposals. Almost any matter on which the executive or legislature has to decide may become a public issue if a significant number of people wish to make it one. The political attitudes of these persons are often stimulated or reinforced by outside agencies—a crusading newspaper, an interest group, or a government agency or official.

The English philosopher and economist Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) saw the greatest difficulty of the legislator as being "in conciliating the public opinion, in correcting it when erroneous, and in giving it that bent which shall be most favourable to produce obedience to his mandates." At the same time, Bentham and some other thinkers believed that public opinion is a useful check on the authority of rulers. Bentham demanded that all official acts be publicized, so that an enlightened public opinion could pass judgment on them, as would a tribunal: "To the pernicious exercise of the power of government it is the only check."

In the early years of modern democracy, some scholars acknowledged the power of public opinion but warned that it could be a dangerous force. Tocqueville was concerned that a government of the masses would become a "tyranny of the majority." But, whether public opinion is regarded as a constructive or a baneful force in a democracy, there are few politicians who are prepared to suggest in public that government should ignore it.

Political scientists have been less concerned with what part public opinion should play in a democratic polity and have given more attention to establishing what part it does play in actuality. From the examination of numerous histories of policy formation, it is clear that no sweeping generalization can be made that will hold in all cases. The role of public opinion varies from issue to issue, just as public opinion asserts itself differently from one democracy to another. Perhaps the safest generalization that can be made is that public opinion does not influence the details of most government

policies but it does set limits within which policy makers must operate. That is, public officials will usually seek to satisfy a widespread demand—or at least take it into account in their deliberations—and they will usually try to avoid decisions that they believe will be widely unpopular.

Yet efforts by political leaders to accommodate government policies to public opinion are not always perceived as legitimate; indeed, journalists and political commentators have often characterized them as pandering to public opinion to curry favour with their constituents or as being driven by the latest poll results. Such charges were questioned, however, by public opinion scholars Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, who argued in *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (2000) that politicians do not actually do this. They found instead that by the early 1970s the accusation of pandering was being used deliberately by prominent journalists, politicians, and other elites as a means of lessening the influence of public opinion on government policy. This practice, they theorized, might have resulted from long-standing suspicion or hostility among elites toward popular participation in government and politics. In keeping with their findings, Jacobs and Shapiro postulated the eventual disappearance from public discourse of the stigmatizing term *pandering* and its replacement by the more neutral term *political responsiveness*.

Although they rejected the charge of pandering, Jacobs and Shapiro also asserted that most politicians tend to respond to public opinion in cynical ways; most of them, for example, use public opinion research not to establish their policies but only to identify slogans and symbols that will make predetermined policies more appealing to their constituents. According to Jacobs and Shapiro, most public opinion research is used to manipulate the public rather than to act on its wishes.

Public opinion exerts a more powerful influence in politics through its "latent" aspects. As discussed by V.O. Key, latent public opinion is, in effect, a probable future reaction by the public to a current decision or action by a public official or a government. Politicians who ignore the possible consequences of latent public opinion risk setback or defeat in future elections. Government leaders who take latent public opinion into account, on the other hand, may be willing to undertake an unpopular action that has a negative effect on public opinion in the near term, provided that the action is also likely to have a significant positive effect at a later and more important time.

Public opinion seems to be much more effective in influencing policy making at the local level than at the state or national levels. One reason for this is that issues of concern to local governments—such as the condition of roads, schools, and hospitals—are less complex than those dealt with by governments at higher levels; another is that at the local level there are fewer institutional or bureaucratic barriers between policy makers and voters. Representative government itself, however, tends to limit the power of public opinion to influence specific government decisions, since ordinarily the only choice the public is given is that of approving or disapproving the election of a given official.

Public opinion polling

Public opinion polling can provide a fairly exact analysis of the distribution of opinions on almost any issue within a given population. Assuming that the proper questions are

asked, polling can reveal something about the intensity with which opinions are held, the reasons for these opinions, and the probability that the issues have been discussed with others. Polling can occasionally reveal whether the people holding an opinion can be thought of as constituting a cohesive group. However, survey findings do not provide much information about the opinion leaders who may have played an important part in developing the opinion (although this information may be obtained through subgroup analysis, provided that the original sample is large enough to ensure that reports of opinion leaders are statistically reliable to a reasonable degree).

Polls are good tools for measuring "what" or "how much." Finding out "how" or "why," however, is the principal function of qualitative research—including especially the use of focus groups—which involves observing interactions between a limited number of people rather than posing a series of questions to an individual in an in-depth interview. However, polls cannot identify the likely future actions of the public in general, nor can they predict the future behaviour of individuals. They are also inappropriate as tools for exploring concepts unfamiliar to respondents. One of the best predictors of how people will vote is, simply, the vote that they cast in the last election. This is especially true if they automatically vote for the same political party, say they strongly support that party, and state that they are certain that they will vote.

Polls may serve a variety of purposes. Those reported in the mass media, for example, may be used to inform, to entertain, or to educate. In an election, well-run polls may constitute one of the most systematic and objective sources of political information. They are also the means by which journalists, politicians, business leaders, and other elites—whether they admit it or not—learn what the general public is thinking (other sources include casual encounters with ordinary citizens, receiving online petitions, listening to callers on radio talk shows, and reading letters from concerned citizens). Other things being equal, leaders who pay attention to public opinion will be better able to understand the groups they are trying to influence and better equipped to communicate overall.

Ideally, the people who prepare surveys and carry them out have no mission other than the objective and systematic measurement of public opinion. It is nonetheless possible for bias to enter into the polling process at any point, especially in cases where the entity commissioning the poll has a financial or political interest in the result or wishes to use the result to promote a specific agenda. Polls have been skewed from the outset by news companies surveying public opinion on political issues, by manufacturing firms engaged in market research, by interest groups seeking to popularize their views, and even by academic scholars wishing to inform or influence public discourse about some significant social or scientific issue. The results of such potentially biased surveys are frequently released to the mass media in order to magnify their impact, a practice known as advocacy polling. (*See below* Nonscientific polling.)

Opinion research

Opinion research developed from market research. Early market researchers picked small samples of the population and used them to obtain information on such questions as how many people read a given magazine or listen to the radio and what the public likes and dislikes in regard to various consumer goods. About 1930 both

commercial researchers and scholars began to experiment with the use of these market research techniques to obtain information on opinions about political issues. In 1935 the American public opinion statistician George Gallup began conducting nationwide surveys of opinions on political and social issues in the United States. One of the first questions asked by the American Institute of Public Opinion, later to be called the Gallup Poll, was "Are Federal expenditures for relief and recovery too great, too little, or about right?" To this, 60 percent of the sample replied that they were too great, only 9 percent thought they were too little, and 31 percent regarded them as about right (the poll did not have a category for those who had no opinion).

From the 1930s on, the spread of opinion polls conducted by both commercial and academic practitioners continued at an accelerated pace in the United States. State and local polls—some sponsored by newspapers—were started in many parts of the country, and opinion research centres were organized at several universities. Before and during World War II, opinion polls were extensively used by U.S. government agencies, notably the Department of Agriculture, the Treasury Department, and the War Department.

Regional and global surveys

At the same time, opinion research was increasingly used in other parts of the world. Affiliates of the American Institute of Public Opinion were organized in Europe and Australia in the late 1930s, and, following World War II, polling organizations appeared in numerous countries of Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The World Association for Public Opinion Research was founded in 1947.

Several regional and multi-country surveys were established in the 20th century. Studies of the

European Economic Community first appeared as the Eurobarometer Surveys in 1974. The twice-yearly surveys, sponsored by the European Union, use a common questionnaire to determine trends in attitudes in categories such as cultural and national identity, international relations, living conditions, media, political participation, values and religion, and policy debates within the European Union. The core survey is augmented by in-depth investigations of subjects such as the role of women, energy use and the environment, alcohol consumption, health, and the future of pension programs.

Other regional studies, often led by university research programs or NGOs as well as by national governments, have been developed around the world. The Latinobarometer, based in Chile, publishes an annual study of attitudes toward democracy, trust in institutions, and other topical issues pertaining to Latin American countries. Similar comparative regional barometer surveys have been undertaken in eastern Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean. The International Social Survey Program, better known as the ISSP Survey, is a collaborative effort involving research organizations in many parts of the world. Its survey topics include work, gender roles, religion, and national identity. The World Values Survey takes a slightly more political tack by examining the ways in which religious views, identity, or individual beliefs correspond to larger phenomena such as democracy and economic development. Using World Values Survey results, the American political scientist Ronald Inglehart found that democratic institutions develop

and endure only in societies that emphasize what he called "self-expression values," including individual autonomy, tolerance, trust, and political activism. This value orientation is also known as postmaterialism.

Increasingly, corporations, NGOs, and other multinational charities and interest groups have sponsored international comparative studies, as have some countries. Many of these studies are conducted by commercial research companies that are themselves becoming multinational organizations.

Any opinion research that aims to be truly international faces a number of challenges. First, the program must identify issues that can be studied in several different countries, if not throughout the world. Next, in developing the survey, the project leaders must determine ways to frame questions—many of which demand cultural sensitivity and careful wording—comparably from one country to the next. Many such surveys, however, fail to cover every region of the world adequately. The countries of the Middle East, for example, tend to be underrepresented, and in some less-developed countries these surveys are carried out only in urban centres.

World opinion

Near the end of the 20th century, the increasing importance of global telecommunication, trade, and transportation contributed to interest in a new concept of world public opinion, or "world opinion." The idea began to receive serious academic consideration as scholars noticed certain global homogeneities in views and attitudes as well as in tastes and consumer behaviour.

According to the American political scientist Frank Rusciano, world opinion can be understood as "the moral judgments of observers which actors must heed in the international arena, or risk isolation as a nation." Rusciano argued that a "world opinion" of sorts can be identified when there is general consensus among informed and interested individuals around the world involving: (1) the major issues that form the agenda for world opinion, (2) the relative emphasis or importance allotted these issues over time, and (3) the dates or time period in which these issues were important. The challenge posed by the development of world opinion, he concluded, concerns a country's image in the world—that is, its reputation in world opinion. Citing examples such as Germany in the wake of reunification, South Africa during the era of apartheid, and the United States since the end of the Cold War, Rusciano suggested that some countries will adjust their actions in the world in order to maintain or strengthen their reputations in world opinion.

Some scholars have been skeptical of the notion of world opinion, arguing that it lacks methodological rigour. They question how the views of millions of people living in poverty or under authoritarian or totalitarian regimes can be accounted for and compared with the views of those living in democracies. By definition, world opinion cannot be measured, because there is no single general framework capable of drawing representative samples from the populations of different countries. Moreover, the rural areas of many developing countries—including China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, much of the Middle East, and most countries of Africa—are largely untouched by public opinion polling. Consequently, any formulation of world opinion tends to represent only the opinions of social and political elites living in urban centres. Although this emphasis may be partly justified by the fact that elite groups are able to

influence events in their countries, it fails to represent the world population as a whole on the basis of one person, one vote. In order to achieve such global representation, a prototypical poll would need to accommodate the population disparities between countries by weighting, for example, the views of a single Chinese respondent with a factor roughly 100 times greater than that assigned to the views of a single British or American respondent. And there are instances of countries that choose to go against public opinion. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, for example, Iceland, Norway, and Japan continued to allow commercial whaling operations despite an international moratorium (1986) and criticisms and protests from around the world.

Despite these difficulties, Rusciano identified certain events, such as the First Persian Gulf War (1990–91), whose outcomes were bolstered by world opinion. He claimed that a prevailing world attitude of support for the defense of Kuwait effectively isolated Iraq and its president, Saddam Hussein, and contributed to a swift U.S.-led victory against the Iraqi forces that had invaded Kuwait. In Rusciano's view, although world opinion may succeed in supporting, controlling, or limiting conflicts in certain instances, it is better conceived, at least for the present, as one among many variables utilized by political leaders in their formulation of foreign policy.

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.