

## CHANGING PUBLIC OPINION

### Traditional Definitions of Public Opinion

Traditional senses of “the public” include beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about the following:

- Affairs related to the state, the government, or broad social institutions.
- Something that is open and accessible to everyone.
- All the people who are affected by an event, policy, or decision. While “private” actions concern only those who participate in them, “public” actions affect both participants and the rest of the people either directly or indirectly.<sup>1</sup>
- Something that is of common concern.
- The public *good*, as opposed to the private *interests* of individuals who represent only a segment of the broader public.

### Modern Definitions of Public Opinion

The modern sense of public opinion is multidimensional and has the following characteristics:

- It represents only one prevailing opinion among many possible ones.
- It tends to be transitory.
- It refers to the opinion that seems to be the most dominant, widespread, or popular, even though there will always be a plurality of existing public opinions.
- It relates to “action or readiness for action with regard to a given issue on the part of members of a public who are reacting in the expectation that others in the public are similarly oriented toward the same issue.”<sup>2</sup>
- It is jointly produced by the following: (a) elite opinion leaders who express and publish opinions, have access to media outlets and technologies, and have high degrees of social influence or institutional power; (b) statistical records, which represent and measure opinions collected through polls and surveys; and (c) people’s “quasi-statistical sense” of which opinions prevail in their social and media environments, as well as how their own opinions match up with others’.

1 Mill, J. S. (2002 [1863]). *On Liberty* (see Chapter IV). In *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*. New York: Modern Library; Dewey, J. (1988 [1927]). *The public and its problems*. *John Dewey: The later works, 1925–1953*. Vol. 2, edited by J. Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

2 Davison, W. P. (1958). The public opinion process. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 22, 91–106; also see Allport, F. (1937). Toward a science of public opinion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1, 7–23.

## Dimensions of Opinion and Expression<sup>3</sup>

- *Cognitive/Theoretical*: Beliefs about the objective truth of factual, historical, or scientific matters.
- *Normative/Practical*: Beliefs about the moral or ethical rightness of actions, decisions, policies, practices, norms, laws, or values.
- *Expressive/Evaluative*: Beliefs about the truthfulness or sincerity of people’s subjective expressions of who they are and what they believe. Also, beliefs about the authenticity of expressions—i.e., whether an utterance or a cultural work (e.g., a work of art, a literary text, or a film) adequately expresses a personal viewpoint, a tradition, a coherent worldview, an artistic vision, or a group identity.

## Polling and Aggregation — The Dominant Approach to Public Opinion Research

*Aggregation* refers to the method of collecting opinions that have been generated and expressed by disparate individuals, through either voting or polling. Aggregation is the fundamental assumption of the statistical analysis of public opinion. The assumption that aggregation reflects public opinion relates to the *random sampling procedure* in public opinion survey research. The random sampling entails that every individual has an equal chance to be picked by the survey. Thus, even with a small sample size, randomly chosen individuals are assumed to represent the entire population.

Critics<sup>4</sup> of the aggregative method raise the following objections to the way it represents and measures public opinion:

- Statistical aggregation artificially represents public opinion because it fails to reflect the fundamentally social nature of opinion formation. It also therefore fails to show how the isolated opinions it collects relate to one another.
- Polling’s “one person, one vote” approach also overlooks power differentials in society. It falsely assumes that every individual opinion is equivalent and carries equal weight.
- Aggregation also fails to recognize that certain individuals within groups usually express opinions that carry more weight than the differing opinions of other group members.
- The same dynamic applies to different social groups within society. Some groups will have greater resources of expression, media dissemination, mobilization, and social influence than others.
- The “random sampling” procedure of public opinion polling blinds the process to individual respondents’ relative social roles and positions.
- People also differ in their relative ability to express or even have an opinion on an issue, because they vary in their education, access to information, social knowledge, awareness of issues, or habits and opportunities of opinion expression.
- Opinions only matter when they are expressed by those who are responsible for taking the actions that relate to those opinions. There are “active minorities” who take interest in influencing and mobilizing public opinion on specific issues. But these effective and active minorities cannot be said to represent the general public.
- Similarly, there is the “silent majority” that better represents the general public, but it is generally unconcerned about issues that either do not affect it or that they do not think they themselves can affect (Champagne, p. 119).

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action. Reason and the rationalization of society*, Vol. 1, translated by T. McCarthy, 15–23. Boston: Beacon Press.

<sup>4</sup> For overviews of criticism, see Beniger, J. R. (1992). The impact of polling on public opinion: Reconciling Foucault, Habermas, and Bourdieu. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 4, 204–219 and Splichal, S. (1999). *Public opinion: Developments and controversies in the Twentieth century*, 221–269. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. For a classic critique, see Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

What are practical implications of this controversy?

- These criticisms of the aggregation method call attention to potential blind spots in statistical research that attempts to measure how public opinion is formed, distributed, and changed.
- But if we recognize that these blind spots might exist, we can remain sensitive to inequalities that affect public opinion formation.
- Those inequalities can consist of differentials in the following: information access, awareness, attentiveness, education, social influence, media access, visibility, social or political power, and expressive competence.
- Critics of the aggregative method might be right to argue that researchers should study only potentially *effective* public opinions.
- But defenders of aggregation and random sampling argue that these methods can have *populist effects*. That is, they can give greater voice to opinions that would otherwise have been ignored were it not for the “one person, one vote” assumptions of polling.<sup>5</sup>

### Elements of the Public Opinion Process<sup>6</sup>

- **Issues:** The topics about which people have opinions. These topics can fall within or cut across the three public opinion dimensions—i.e., cognitive/theoretical matters of truth, or normative/practical matters of rightness, or expressive/evaluative matters of sincerity and authenticity. Issue agendas are typically set by opinion leaders and by the mass media. Also, issues have their own dynamics of development, and these dynamics set parameters for the development of public opinion.
- **Communication:** The social and/or technologically mediated channels through which opinion circulates. Most public opinion forms through *combinations* and *interactions* of interpersonal and mass-mediated communication.
- **Perceptions of Reality:** People’s perceptions of “what the case is” in the material world, in the social world, and in themselves, as well as their judgments about how those three levels of reality intersect.
- **Demographic, Social, and Psychological Characteristics:** Different attributes or tendencies that vary across, and often within, individuals. Many of these characteristics are potentially relevant to public opinion research, including the following: race, class, gender, age, educational level, cultural tastes, group affiliations, access to information, media use, social position, occupation, opinion leadership, fear of isolation, conformity, etc.

### Influences of Perception on Public Opinion<sup>7</sup>

- **Pluralistic ignorance:** The tendency for people to inaccurately perceive minority opinions as majority opinions, and vice versa. Pluralistic ignorance more likely occurs either when people’s own judgments are not well established or when they face ambiguous situations.<sup>8</sup> Pluralistic ignorance usually results when an issue generates divisive opinions. It may also change people’s opinions when they feel embarrassed at being in the minority.<sup>9</sup>

5 Converse, P. E. (1987). Changing conceptions of public opinion in the political process. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51, S12–S24.

6 Adapted from the following: Davison, W. P. (1958). The public opinion process. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 22, 91–106; Glynn, C. J. (2005). Public opinion as a social process. In Dunwoody, S., Becker, L.B., McLeod, D.M., & Kosicki, G.M. (Eds.) *The evolution of key mass communication concepts*, 139–163. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

7 Glynn, C. J., Ostman, R. E., & McDonald, D. G. (1995). Opinions, perception, and social reality. In Glasser, T.L. & Salmon, C.T. (Eds.). (1995). *Public opinion and the communication of consent*, 249–277. New York: Guilford Press.

8 Latané, B., & Darley, J. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

9 Miller, D. T., & McFarland, C. (1987). Pluralistic ignorance: When similarity is interpreted as dissimilarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 298–305.

- *False consensus*: The tendency for people to “see their own behavioral choices and judgments as *relatively* common and appropriate to existing circumstances while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, or inappropriate.”<sup>10</sup> In situations of false consensus, people project their own attributes onto others. But they overestimate how many other people share their opinions and attitudes, as well as the degree to which others share them.
- *Looking glass perception*: People’s perception that others hold the same opinions on issues as they themselves do, regardless of what others’ actual opinions are.<sup>11</sup> The looking glass perception is similar to pluralistic ignorance and false consensus, but it usually results when people are not sensitive to differing opinions in others, and when issues do *not* generate divisive opinions.
- *The spiral of silence (SOS) theory*: Noelle-Neumann’s theory that people will confidently express their opinions when they notice that they share the prevailing opinion, but that they will remain silent and keep their opinions to themselves when they are in the minority.<sup>12</sup> Noelle-Neumann bases this theory on strong assumptions that people fear isolation and that society will use isolation to punish those who hold deviant or unpopular opinions. Scholars have criticized this theory for disregarding the complexity of media environments and for failing to apply beyond small-group situations in which people feel social pressures directly.<sup>13</sup>
- *Third-person effect*: A tendency for people to believe that media messages, especially potentially harmful ones, will have a greater impact “not on ‘me’ or ‘you,’ but on ‘them’—the third persons.”<sup>14</sup> With respect to perception, people perceive greater effects of harmful media messages on others than on themselves. With respect to behavior, the difference between perceived media effects on the self and on others will lead people to endorse restricting particular media messages. The third-person effect therefore might play a role in disputes over freedom of expression versus censorship.

How can these theories of public opinion perception inform your practice?

- They offer ways of seeing how perceived opinions differ from measured opinions.
- Pluralistic ignorance, false consensus, and the looking glass perception can help researchers assess situations in which people believe that others’ opinions are either more conservative or more liberal than their own.
- The third-person effect helps explain public support for censorship. It proposes that people’s support for censorship may be based on their misperception that a majority of *other* people are vulnerable to media messages.
- The spiral of silence theory suggests that a homogenous view in a society will make people either conform and change to the same view, or keep silent. But in complex media environments, there should be a better understanding that people can find alternative views and channels that fit their views.

10 Ross, L., Greene, D., & House, P. (1977). The false consensus phenomenon: An attribution bias in self-perception and social psychological processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 13, 279–301.

11 Fields, J. M., & Schuman, H. (1976). Public beliefs about the beliefs of the public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40, 427–488.

12 Noelle-Neumann, E. (1993). *The spiral of silence: Public opinion-our social skin*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Noelle-Neumann, E. (1995). Public opinion and rationality. In T. L. Glasser & C. T. Salmon (Eds.), *Public opinion and the communication of consent*, 33–54, New York: Guilford Press.

13 Glynn, C. J. and McLeod, J. (1985). Implications of the spiral of silence theory for communication and public opinion research. In Sanders, K., Kaid, L., & Nimmo, D. (Eds.), *Political Communication Yearbook*, 1, 43-65. Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

14 Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47, 1–15.



## CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

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