

The Concept and Measuring of Public Opinion



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Abstract

The term 'Public Opinion' has been one of the major factors behind some of the world's most remarkable happenings in the social, economic, cultural, political and ecological spheres in the whole world. Its importance cannot be neglected for both the public and the government, since one forms it and the other applies strategies on the basis of it. Keeping in mind its dual function, it becomes very interesting to study this concept from its conception to execution. Walter Lippmann has been very influential in presenting a comprehensive view of public opinion. In his *Public Opinion*, he presents a recent picture where public opinion has attained a strong hold in democracies where it has achieved the status of 'control structure' to use the term of Marxism given by Louis Althusser. He asserts that in democracies, "there have been skilled organizations of opinions who understood the mystery well enough to create majorities on election day." The present paper is an attempt to ponder over the concept of public opinion and the ways using which we can measure the overall impact and nature of public Opinion.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Concept, Control Structure, Measurement, Democracy.

Introduction

We awaken by asking the right questions. We awaken when we see knowledge being spread that goes own personal experiences. We awaken when we see popular opinion being wrong but accepted as being right, and what is right being pushed as being wrong. We awaken by seeking answers in corners that are not popular. And we awaken by turning on the light inside when everything outside feels dark.

Rise Up and Salute the Sun , Suzy Kassem

The Concept of Public Opinion

The concept of public opinion is as old as the thoughts of people began taking a collective shape for any specific affair related to public goodness in general sense. It is difficult to locate any such starting point. That unknown beginning may be obliterate today, but the foundation of public opinion was laid down there. The collective thoughts of people gradually developed and changed their centre from personal interests to civic goodness in a democratic society. Although, the concept of public opinion has its existence in full ease only in democracy, but in other types of societies it has to face many kinds of restrictions to be on the fore. We have several events to scrutinize various examples of public opinion throughout the whole world. If we do it honestly, we may come across the deep philosophy behind any such public event. This philosophy of public opinion accords to specific determinants of age, country, nature of public thought and causes of issue. Paul A. Palmer in his Essay "The Concept of Public Opinion in Political Theory" (1936) says that: "The origins of our modern conception of public opinion are usually traced to liberal democratic theories of the eighteenth century; with precursors reaching all the way back to ancient Greece (*The Truth in Hell and Other Essays*, 68)."

It is very difficult to explain the term 'Public Opinion' in a compact way since it suggests a range of analogical meanings. The core of this concept lies in collective individual thoughts which question the veracity or falsehood of any ideology. People in all ages have raised their voice to ask the ruling government something which is objectionable and changeable. This is done in public interest. Maximum good of maximum people is the basic objective behind this concept. Therefore, this opinion is morally upright, nonviolent in nature, broad in outlook, timeless in approach, full of rhetoric in its interrogation and demanding truth as well as what is right in its basic philosophy.

Basically this term is made up of two words: public and opinion. By the word 'public' we mean a collective group of people who come together for a public cause. It is not necessary that they need to assemble at one place for this. In the post-modern world, they can be at places far and even unfamiliar to one another, but using a platform to share their views on a common issue and join in opposition even on social media. According to W. A. Anderson: "A public is that form of collectivity which includes a number of dispersed and non-organized individuals who are faced with an issue about which there may be differences of opinion" (Society, 102). Based on this definition, we may say that close physical contact is not required to form a public; rather it is their common interest in an issue which constitutes this term. An opinion is one that implies careful thought on and consideration of something more important than a private issue. Founded on some kind of evidence, it appeals to a larger section of society for the creation of a healthy and more acceptable mode of life. After having discussed these two terms, we may now take up the meaning of public opinion as a whole. John Dewey in his classic *The Public and its Problems* says that: "Public opinion is judgment which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs (48)." The massive ideas and judgments which have certain stability and are functional for the welfare of society, are thus come in the range of Public Opinion.

There are a number of features which characterize this concept. First of all, it should be agreeable to all in a general way. Otherwise people will not come up to support. If it is acceptable this opinion will create a large wave of revolution. Secondly, it should be rational or logical. Anything illogical can never appeal the people. Something which is logical can attract the attention of people in its direction. Thirdly, public welfare should always be its basic ideology. If an opinion is for the public or civil goodness, it can gain momentum within no time. Fourth, its approach should be wide enough to cover any or every matter whether political, social, economic, environmental or cultural. Fifth, It should always be based on morality which says what good it can bring in society. Sixth, its formation should be natural not an imposed one. Seventh, naturally it is an outcome of rights to freedom of speech and expression, but nowhere this is destructive or negative in approach. Last but not the least, it is the backbone of democratic functioning in any state. Government can take sound decisions based on prevalent, powerful and logical public opinion.

Measuring Public Opinion

V.O. Key, Jr., in his classic *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (1961), opines that: "Governments must concern themselves with the opinions of their citizens, if only to provide a basis for repression of disaffection (3)." Governments have always been trying to know what goes on into the minds of their subjects. Various ways were the yardsticks to measure their thought process. Rebellion of peasants against the rulers was the earliest known measurement of public opinion. Unpaid

taxes was another clue; when rulers saw their tax receipts dwindle and heard reports of tax collectors being killed, they knew that public opinion was turning against them. In present world, governments have much better procedures to learn about public opinion and measure it. We can classify these methods of learning public opinion into informal and formal methods. The informal are very important but they do not involve any formal explicit research methodologies. Informal methodologies include elections, letters from constituents, media coverage, and protest marches. Formal methods, on the other hand, involve definite research designs and formal research methodologies; they are methods designed by experts to research public opinion. Examples of formal methodologies are telephone surveys, focus groups, and content analysis.

Some Informal Ways to Measure Public Opinion Elections

The most common way for a democratic government to learn about public opinion is through elections. They are important because they determine who staffs the government, and they are also one way for the public to express its feelings about politics. But elections are also imperfect measures of public opinion because they reflect only the opinions of those who voted. Elections tend to reflect the views of those who vote, who are not necessarily representative of the public. While elections are a blunt measure of public opinion, they are the most effective means by which public opinion can control the government and public policy. Elected politicians, generally, avoid taking those decisions which may endanger the social fabric, because they know that voters might notice and could show their displeasure at the polls. In this way, elections serve to hold politicians accountable to voters' opinionseven latent opinions that the voters may not consciously hold. So we can say that the perceptions of politicians about the possible public opinion determine their action.

The Media

Media plays an important role in society. It is considered to be the fifth pillar of society. Whether through print or digital mode, it spreads social awareness by providing on the spot information about things happening in society. Many government officials, and many regular citizens, look to the media to understand the views of the public. The media portrays the opinion of people. Television, newspapers, and magazines are important because of the news they choose and how they portray the issues. Television is considered to be the strongest mode of information since it can show latest happenings. Newspapers provide and form opinions from editorialists, columnists, and ordinary people who write letters to the editor. By far this print media has the largest approach to people. Some magazines cover politics in an essentially nonpartisan way, but there are many more magazines that represent practically any political point of view in the political spectrum. In other terms, they are important in determining the political agenda (what people in the government are thinking about) and in framing the issues (how the issues are being considered).

Protests

When issues of public interest are neglected for a long time, people then use this tool to make their government listen to their voice. Both in democratic governments and dictatorships, protests have served governments as indicators of citizens' dissatisfaction with government policies. We have several examples in the history of the world where the people communicated their opinion in this way like: freedom struggle of India and Civil Rights Movement in the United States. These protests may be sometimes violent which may lead to complete disorder of society. So the best leaders of the world have exemplified the people to resort to non-violent ways of protest: a weapon which has won many impossible battles without causing any bloodshed. The goal of such protests is to let the government officials notice a problem they have been ignoring for long.

Formal Ways to Measure Public Opinion

Formal methods are more systematic of ascertaining public opinion. Formal methods are likely to be conducted by scholars who understand both their proper and improper uses and who are less likely to misuse or misinterpret them. Formal methodologies for measuring public opinion are usually classified into quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative methods involve numbers—and usually statistics. However, much research on public opinion is conducted qualitatively. Although qualitative research methodologies tend to be less important in academic research, they are often extremely important when politicians and candidates conduct research for their own purposes.

Some Formal Quantitative Methods**Sample Surveys**

The most common formal qualitative method for learning about public opinion is sample survey. In a sample survey, researchers ask a certain number of people, as per the need, their opinions about any burning question of society. When applied to political use, such as in election campaigns, survey research is often called 'polling' and survey research studies are called 'polls.' Researchers think of survey research as the only way to learn about public opinion, and they devote all, or almost all, of their analysis of public opinion to the analysis of survey research. There are basically three ways to survey people: face-to-face interviews; telephone interviews; and mail surveys.

Face-to-Face Interviews

Face to face interviews are first hand medium to let people know the views of certain responsible persons about any concerned issue of social importance. It may take a long time to conduct it thoroughly, because the interviewer wants that every aspect should be covered. Only then the right message may be conveyed. At one time, this was the most common type of surveying, but it is seldom used today. The advantage of face-to-face surveys is that they can be very long (sometimes over an hour) and more complex, because the interviewer can explain the questions to the respondents. There is a serious drawback of this method which is that the respondents are unlikely to give embarrassing or

socially unacceptable answers because they do not want the interviewer to think ill of them.

Telephone Interviews

The most common type of public opinion survey conducted today is a telephone survey. If you read about a poll in a newspaper or magazine or hear about it on television, it was probably conducted over the telephone. Telephone surveys have some advantages over face-to-face surveys, especially in their much lower cost and faster implementation. The most important drawbacks to telephone surveys are their simplicity and short length. It is impossible to ask, and receive meaningful answers for, complex or long questions. People simply have a difficult time processing complex questions over the telephone. The interviewers can help, but they cannot show pictures over the phone. Another drawback is the short length. Whereas face-to-face interviews can last over an hour, telephone interviews seldom take more than 20 minutes.

Mail Surveys

Mail surveys are seldom used in political research. Although they can be less expensive than telephone surveys, their drawbacks tend to be too important to overlook. The first main drawback is that the response rate tends to be very low, often under 30%, so that it is questionable how well the respondents represent the larger population. The second main drawback is that it is impossible to determine who actually answered the questions. Did the intended respondent answer the questions, or did his teenage daughter do it? Or did he get his buddies to help him and give consensus answers. It is impossible to tell.

Formal Qualitative Methods to Learn Public Opinion

Qualitative methods focus on the source of thinking process. Its purpose is to uncover the quality of opinion. Quantitative analysis determines how many people have a specific opinion but it does not determine how people think and why they think the way they do. Qualitative research has the opposite strengths and weaknesses; it is useless in determining how many people have a specific opinion, but it is very useful for uncovering how people think and why they think the way they do. There are many types of qualitative research, but the most important ones for political research are in-depth interviews and focus groups.

In-depth Interviews

The researchers involve with people, usually face to face, for much longer times than they would in survey research—often several hours, which may be divided between days. The main purpose of in-depth interviews is to uncover the outlooks and perspectives of the people who are interviewed. Instead of measuring someone on the basis of a few questions, a respondent in an in-depth interview might be asked simply how he or she feels about affirmative action. The data obtained from in-depth interviews can be the basis of respondents' opinions and how they structure the world in their minds.

Focus Groups

A focus group involves a small group of people, generally about 8-12, and a moderator. The moderator asks questions, almost always open-ended. A typical question might be, "What do you think about secularism?" The main purpose of focus group research, is to find out what people think about important issues and how they think about them. That is, what perspectives do they use when thinking about issues? How do they frame the issues? What issues do they think are important?

Conclusion

The concept of public opinion is formed in the public realm and measured by the government. How public opinion is measured, plays a vital role in the democratic discourse of linking what the people want with what the government does. This dual process testifies the level of social atmosphere in any given state. The people need to be more attentive in order to understand the tactics of their government. Stating the responsibility of public Lord Bryce says that: "Every citizen has, or ought to have, thought out for himself certain opinions. . .ought to have a definite view, defensible by arguments, of what the country needs, what principles ought to be applied in governing it, of the men to whose hands the government ought to be entrusted" (Qtd. in

Democratic Theory and Public Opinion, 330). Likewise the government needs to keep in mind the sensible and logical interests of their subjects. For government to accurately implement majority sentiment, it must listen to the people correctly. A democratic society has both responsible people and responsible government. If one is lacking somewhere, the other creates balance. They are complementary for each other.

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