

CHAPTER 11

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Narrative Lecture Outline

Public opinion and polling was front page news and the opening story in November 2000. Television and Web-based news organizations called the state of Florida for Al Gore early in the evening based on exit polls. Shortly thereafter, they had to retract that call and Florida remained hotly contested for weeks! Recounts, vilification, lawsuits, and weeks of distress followed before the U.S. Supreme Court stopped all further vote counting essentially granting the election to George W. Bush. Polls flew, predictions vacillated, and pundits pontificated. The loser in all of this may have been political polling and the tradition of calling elections based on projections instead of actual votes. Americans learned that elections were not high tech in many places and that there were lots of mistakes, spoiled ballots, and problems in American elections. We also learned that there are bad polls out there. How do you tell a bad poll from a good one? Let's examine attitudes, where they come from, and how you measure them.

Political Socialization

Political attitudes are grounded in values. We learn these values by a process known as political socialization. Many factors influence opinion formation. *(I usually ask the students how they think their political attitudes have formed and what factors have influenced them the most. I also ask them about their formative political experiences—nowadays many only remember 9/11 or the death of Princess Di—and how that affects them. You can use Table 11.2 as a jump off point. It is also useful to discuss the nature of their own civic education. Have them read the box titled, “Join the Debate: Teaching Civics in American High Schools” and discuss it.)* The most important factors are:

- The Family**
- School and Peers**
- The Mass Media**
- Religious Groups**
- Race and Ethnicity**
- Gender**
- Age or Generation**
- Region**
- The Impact of Events**

We then discuss what each of these factors is and how they affect political attitudes. For example, if your parents are Republicans, what are you likely to be and why? Is this always the case? How might religion affect political attitudes? The most obvious might be the Christian Coalition or Jews supporting Israel...but what else? Do race and gender

matter, and if so, how and when? What effect do events have? Watergate affected an entire generation...will the Clinton troubles affect this one? How and why? What effect does region have? If you look up the 110th Congress on Wikipedia on the Web, there is a chart listing party affiliation of members of Congress by region. What can this tell us?

Public Opinion and Polling

Public opinion is “what the people think about an issue or set of issues at any given point in time,” and opinions are normally measured by opinion polls. Polls are interviews or surveys of a sample of citizens (it is too expensive and time-consuming to ask everyone!) used to estimate how the public feels about an issue or set of issues.

Seems straightforward, but I see several problems in the definitions. Let’s see how many problems we can discover here. First, the phrase “at any given point in time” implies that opinions change over time. Second, we are assuming that people know what they think and that polls measure those thoughts. Is this a fair assumption? Sampling can also be problematic. How can a subset of the population represent the views of everyone? We are going to use polls to “estimate” public opinion—hmmm. And those are just a few of the problems of polls. In this lecture, we will address the problems and the nature of public opinion and polling. Also, we’ll look at the uses of polls and whether those uses are in the public good or whether polls are a serious problem for democracy.

I usually ask students to surf the Web and bring in examples of what they see as good and bad polls. All of the students turn them in and I choose a few as examples to illustrate possible problems and possible benefits of polling. Some even hand in direct mail polls that are a lot of fun to discuss in class.

The History of Public Opinion Research

Public opinion polling as we know it today developed in the 1930s. Pollsters used scientific methods to measure attitudes. Methods of gathering and analyzing data improved over the years, and survey data began to play an important role in politics and social life. Political leaders today believe that polling and public opinion are important as policy-making tools, so it is important to understand its history and the current uses of public opinion polling.

As early as 1824, newspapers have tried to predict election winners using polls. In 1883, the *Boston Globe* used exit polls to try to predict winners. And in 1916, *Literary Digest* mailed survey postcards to potential voters in an attempt to predict the outcome. From 1920 to 1932, they predicted every presidential election correctly.

Literary Digest used straw polls that are now seen as highly problematic. They lucked out by correctly predicting four elections, but their luck ran out in 1936 when they predicted that Alf Landon would beat FDR. FDR won in a landslide, taking all but two states.

Straw polls simply ask as many people as possible a given set of questions. They do not choose a sample in a random and scientific manner, thereby ensuring that the sample will represent the population. *Literary Digest* made several important errors: 1) They sampled from telephone directories and car ownership records, thus over-sampling upper and middle class people and those with Republican sympathies; 2) They mailed their questionnaires in early September and opinion changed before the November elections; and 3) They committed the sin of self-selection. Only highly motivated people

returned the survey, so the survey over-sampled better educated, politically interested, and wealthier people; again more Republicans.

George Gallup, however, successfully predicted the 1936 election. His company, the Gallup Corporation, continues to be very successful in predicting electoral outcomes.

The American Voter was published in 1960 and continues to influence the way we think of mass attitudes and behavior. This book studied the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections and discussed how class coalitions led to party affiliation. These early studies led to the National Elections Study (NES), which still drives the research of political scientists interested in voting behavior.

Traditional Public Opinion Polls

Public officials learn about public opinion in many ways: through election results; citizen contact such as phone calls, faxes, and e-mails about issues and policies; letters to the editor in newspapers or magazines; and public opinion polls or surveys. Polls help public officials (and others interested in public opinion) have a broader and more scientific understanding of what the public collectively wants. Good polls produce good information. Bad polls do not. So how do we figure out if a poll is good or bad? To do so, we need to look at question wording, sampling, and how respondents are contacted.

1) **Question wording:** The respondent needs to know how the questions are phrased. Bad questions lead to bad results. There are thousands (or more) bad polls out there. An example of a bad question might be, “If the government takes our guns that we use to protect our families away from us, only criminals will have guns and we will all be in danger. Are you in favor of placing your family in greater danger? Yes/No”

2) **Sampling:** In order for a poll to be reliable, the sample must be taken accurately. The best method is a scientific random sample. Such a sample guarantees that each person in the population has the same statistical chance of being selected.

There are a number of sampling techniques. Some of the techniques are poor and should be avoided. These include nonstratified sampling, straw polls, and most nonprobability sampling methods. A more reliable nonprobability method is a quota sample in which a pollster ensures representativeness using quotas. For example, in a citywide survey, respondents should reflect the make-up of the city: 30 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, and so on.

Most national surveys use stratified sampling. A simple random sample of the American population would not be a very good predictor of election results, since not everyone votes and the survey could end up with a sample that excludes women, a minority group, region, or the like. As we recall from our discussion of political socialization, these things matter.

3) **Contacting respondents:** The method of contact is important. Since 95 percent of Americans have a telephone, random phone calling would be a valid method. However, this should not be the method of choice in Sudan. The rising use of cell phones might cause problems, especially among younger people, but so far, this has not been a major concern. Some surveys are done in person, but many worry that the presence of the interviewer causes problems.

In general, you should never trust a poll that does not tell you the question wording, the sampling method, and the ways in which respondents were contacted. Reputable and reliable pollsters will also inform you of the number of respondents (the “n”) and the error rate (+ or – 5 percent) so that you can determine for yourself whether to believe the results. Any poll that tells you to call 555-9712 for “yes” and 555-9713 for “no” is unscientific and unreliable. The same is true of Internet polls that ask you to register your opinion now. These are not random samples at all!

Political Polls

Tracking polls: continuous surveys that enable a campaign to chart its daily rise and fall in popularity. These are small samples and conducted every 24 hours. They are fraught with reliability problems, but may be a decent measure of trends.

Push polls: try to lead the subject to a specified conclusion and the worst are designed simply to “push” subjects away from candidates by linking them to negative events or traits in the question.

Exit polls: polls conducted at polling places on Election Day.

Shortcomings of Polling

Bad reporting and bad polling can change political campaigns, hurt careers, and have other bad consequences. There are large numbers of bad polls out there! It is our job to learn how to consume polls critically so that we ignore the bad polls and take “good” polls with an understanding of their shortcomings.

Sampling Error: the margin of error. The sampling error is quite small if the sample is carefully selected. All polls contain some error, and 3 to 5 percent is considered a reasonably small rate of error. A 3 percent error rate means that the poll is 97 percent accurate! These rates become extremely important if a race is close:

John Kerry 48%
George Bush 52%
Margin of Error: 5%

Do these numbers tell us anything? No. The contestants are only four points apart, and given the error rate, the real race could look like this:

John Kerry 53% (48% plus 5)
George Bush 47% (52% minus 5)

Limited Respondent Options: Have you ever taken a survey (or a test) and did not like any of the answers? If the options are not broad enough, you get bad results. This is a common shortcoming of many polls.

Lack of Information: If surveys ask questions about subjects that the respondents don't understand or don't know about, the answers will often be invalid. The use of filter questions is helpful, such as, "have you thought about...?"

Intensity: Polls do not measure intensity well. We can learn a position on an issue, but not how strong that opinion might be.

Why We Form and Express Political Opinions

Personal Benefits: Conventional wisdom holds that Americans are more "me-oriented" today than ever before. People therefore tend to choose policies that will benefit them. For example, the elderly favor Social Security. When policies don't affect us personally, we often have difficulty forming an opinion. Foreign policy is a prime example, since most Americans know little about the rest of the world. The public good seems to be a waning commodity.

Political Knowledge: Americans are highly literate and over 82 percent graduate from high school. We also have access to a wide range of higher education. However, we don't know much about politics! In 2002, a Department of Education report found that most high school seniors have a poor grasp of history. Only 33 percent of people can identify their own representative to Congress. We are also generally geographically illiterate, with most Americans unable to locate the Persian Gulf or Vietnam on a map. However, most of us have political opinions guided by issues, events, people, ideology, or something else entirely.

Cues from Leaders: Low levels of knowledge make public opinion highly changeable. Rapid opinion shifts are common when the public does not have much information on an issue or if the information is bad. Political leaders and the media can often have a large effect on public opinion, since we are often uninformed and may not care to become knowledgeable about current issues.

Political Ideology: When people espouse an ideology, even if they don't fully understand it, the ideology affects their opinions. Americans tend to assert that they are liberal, conservative, or moderate. Sometimes these labels can be meaningful. American conservatives generally favor smaller government and less regulation. American liberals generally believe the government can do a good job providing for the poor or elderly. But this seems to play out differently today. A person's conception of what it means to be a Republican or Democrat can determine their answers to a poll, regardless of what a more thoughtful consideration of the issue might lead them to believe.

How Polling and Public Opinion Affect Politicians, Politics, and Policy

Now come the most important questions of all: So what? Do polls affect the political process? If so, how and to what effect? Are they benign ways of measuring the attitudes of a democratic citizenry, or are they malignant attempts to control and manipulate the people?

Politicians and others (including the media) spend millions of dollars on polls. How are they used? What is their effect? These are difficult questions to answer. How good and accurate are most polls? Do politicians know much about polling? Do they attempt to make sure that their polls are accurate, reliable, and scientific? Or not?

Polls can actually change opinions too. Is all this polling really measuring public opinion or forming it? And is the answer to this question a problem or concern?

Public opinion fluctuates—sometimes wildly. Should politicians follow public opinion? Lead it? Ignore it? Guide it?

After discussing polls and attitudes, what do you think?

Web Sites for Instructors

The **American Association for Public Opinion Research** (AAPOR) is a professional association that publishes *Public Opinion Quarterly* whose tables of contents are available at this site:

www.aapor.org

The **Gallup Organization** is one of the best-known and most well-respected polling agencies. Their Web site offers access to reports, polling data, and more about a variety of issues.

www.gallup.com

The **General Social Survey** Web site of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) offers access to their annual surveys of American attitudes and opinions.

www.norc.uchicago.edu/projects/gensoc.asp

The **American National Election Study** offers regular polls on elections, voting behavior, and electoral issues.

www.electionstudies.org/

Public Agenda OnLine offers nonpartisan issue guides on a variety of topics, links to other sources of public opinion information, and their own research.

www.publicagenda.org

The **Roper Center for Public Opinion Research** is located at the University of Connecticut and is the largest library of public opinion data in the world. The Center's mission focuses on data preservation and access, education and research. Includes the GSS—General Social Survey.

www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/

The **Virtual Reference Desk at Binghamton University** offers a Web site devoted to polling and public opinion, including information on bad polls and techniques. Also offers links to some opinion sites.

library.lib.binghamton.edu/vrd/polls.html

The Washington Post Data Directory is a guide to public opinion data published on the Internet by nonpartisan organizations.

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/datadir.htm

Zogby International has been polling for over 16 years. Among the interesting information on their Web site: an article by founder, John Zogby, about the nature of polling (that is very good) and explains why your students may not know a single person who has been asked his/her opinion about current issues; an archive of e-clippings from media stories using their data; and a search engine for polling data (a search on George Bush pulls up a huge list). Also offers a subscription to their monthly newsletter “Zogby’s Real America” and a “comprehensive resource for finding out where Americans stand on topics ranging from politics to social issues, with analysis from John Zogby in a new style.”

www.zogby.com

Web Activities for Classes

- 1) Assign students to surf the Web to find glaring examples of “bad polls.” The discussion that follows is often quite fun!
- 2) Have students explore ideas about socialization found on the Web. They can focus on the concept itself or on the ways different disciplines study it. If you choose the latter, ask students to find examples of studies on socialization from fields like anthropology, sociology, education, and political science. Have them discuss the similarities and differences they find.
- 3) Have students look at campaign and related Web sites to determine how politicians and the media use polls. Hold a class discussion on the implications of these uses.
- 4) Have the students find good, reliable, scientific polls and poll results on the Web. Have them write a paper explaining why they classify these polls and results as reliable.
- 5) Have students find the biannual *Pew Media Survey* online. What can this survey tell us about American attitudes and the media?

General Class Activities and Discussion Assignments

- 1) Have students address the following: Write a paper based on your own political ideology and opinions. How were they formed? Consider those who have influenced these opinions and political views. Is the text correct in asserting what the dominant factors of political socialization are? Have students compare their experiences with those of their classmates.

- 2) Most people's opinions are affected by what can be called a "formative political event." For some people, this event was the death of Princess Di. For others, it was the Persian Gulf War, and for still others it was the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Have students think about their "formative political event" or first political memory. Have them write a paper or discuss: How did that event shape your political ideas and world view? What about your parents and grandparents? Ask them what major events affected their political perceptions. Compare those events with your classmates.
- 3) As a class project, choose an issue of interest and formulate a class poll. Then, have students administer it on campus. Discuss the process, results, and problems of your poll and extrapolate that to polling in general.
- 4) Assign students to watch two weeks of TV news and pay attention to newspapers during the same time frame. Have them write a paper analyzing the ways in which the media use polls. What are the implications of their findings?

Possible Simulations

- 1) Stage a debate in class. One side should argue that public opinion polling is inherently problematic and should not be used by government or politicians. The other side should argue that polling is a valid way to determine the will of the people. Each side should do research to flesh out their arguments.
- 2) Divide the class into "x" number of groups. Give the entire class a series of topics and have each group write two good survey questions and two bad ones for each topic. Have the class share the results and discuss why certain questions are good and others are bad.
- 3) Some countries forbid the use of polls in the last few weeks of an election campaign. In the United States, this is not the case. Divide students into different country groups and have them research rules about polling during elections. Have them debate the merits of different ways of regulating polling during elections.

Additional Sources

Herbert Asher. *Polling and the Public: What Every American Should Know*. CQ Books, 2001.

Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza. *Why Welfare States Persist: The Importance of Public Opinion in Democracies*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Katherine Cramer Walsh. *Talking About Race: Community Dialogues and the Politics of Difference*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Robert Eisinger. *The Evolution of Presidential Polling*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Robert Erikson, et al. *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Robert Erikson, Michael Mackuen, and James Stimson. *The Macro Polity*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Robert S. Erikson and Kent L. Tedin. *American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact*, 8/e. Longman, 2006.

George Gallup. *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion*. Scholarly Resources, published annually.

John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. *Stealth Democracy: American's Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Ole R. Holsti. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Darrell Huff. *How to Lie With Statistics*. WW Norton, 1993.

Vincent Hutchings. *Public Opinion and Democratic Accountability: How Citizens Learn About Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2003.

Helen Ingram, et al (eds). *Mediating Effect of Public Opinion on Public Policy: Exploring the Realm of Health Care*. State University of New York Press, 2004.

Paul Lavrakas and Michael J. Traugott. *Election Polls, the News Media and Democracy*. Chatham House, 2000.

Walter Lippman. *Public Opinion*. Hard Press, 2006.

David Moore. *The Superpollsters: How They Measure and Manipulate Public Opinion in America*. Four Walls Eight Windows, 1992.

Willem E. Saris and Paul M. Sniderman (eds). *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

James A. Stimson. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Jeffrey Stonecash. *Political Polling: Strategic Information in Campaigns*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

Keith Warren. *In Defense of Public Opinion Polling*. Westview Press, 2001.

Robert Weissberg. *Polling, Policy, and Public Opinion*. Palgrave, 2002.