

The Function of Public Opinion Polls

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“How can polls aid the processes of democracy?”

OF ALL writers who have discussed the role of public opinion in American democracy, none foresaw more clearly than James Bryce the importance of a periodic check on the will of the people. Writing some fifty years ago, Bryce said that the next stage in the development of democratic government would be reached “if the will of the majority of citizens were to become ascertainable at all times.”

In two respects Bryce saw the need of better methods of ascertaining public opinion. He noted that “the choice of one man against another is an imperfect way of expressing the mind of a constituency.” Recent political history provides ample evidence of the difficulty of analyzing election returns on candidates in a way to reveal the will of the people on specific issues.

Bryce also pointed out that with the quickening pace of events, many problems might come up between elections which could not be submitted to the electorate. He wrote that “the action of opinion is continuous, that of voting occasional, and in the intervals between the elections of legislative bodies, changes may take place materially affecting the views of voters.” The accuracy of this observation has been borne out innumerable times in the last few years.

By their very nature, modern sampling polls can and do separate the popularity of candidates from the popularity of issues. Polls can report which views of a candidate the public favors,

which they reject. The speed with which sampling referenda can be completed for the entire nation is such that public opinion on any given issue can be reported within forty-eight hours if the occasion warrants. Thus the goal has nearly been reached when public opinion can be "ascertainable at all times."

The problem confronting statesmen who have had to rely on guesswork in determining the will of the people was well described three decades ago by President Woodrow Wilson in a talk before the National Press Club. Wilson said to the assembled newspapermen:

"You say, 'All the people out my way think so and so.' Now, I know perfectly well that you have not talked with all the people out your way. I find that out again and again. . . . The people of the United States . . . are thinking for themselves, every man for himself; and you do not know, and, the worst of it is, since the responsibility is mine, I do not know what they are thinking about. I have the most imperfect means of finding out, and yet I have got to act as if I knew. . . . I am not put here to do what I please."

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"Most students of government view with alarm the growing influence of spokesmen of pressure groups. Can polls do anything to thwart these lobbyists?"

THE chief weapon of the spokesman for a pressure group in seeking special legislative favors is the threat to punish at the next election any legislator who goes contrary to the selfish interests of his group.

To make this threat carry weight, the pressure group spokesman must claim a united front in the organization he represents.

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He must convince legislators that he voices the unanimous or nearly unanimous views of his membership, that all feel so keenly about the particular legislation in question that they would vote against any candidate for office who opposes it.

Pressure groups have grown to their present powerful position in government because no organization or method existed to deflate their claims. When spokesmen talked about swinging millions of votes for or against a measure, the legislator had no effective way of countering these claims.

Public opinion polls can find out quickly and accurately the views of any group in the population. They can show, and often do, when the rank and file of the membership in a group hold views opposite those of their official spokesmen. Polls can thus limit the claims of pressure groups to the facts, and thus prevent many insupportable demands for special privilege.

During recent years, polls of organized workers have, on many occasions, found them taking exactly the opposite points of view from the spokesmen of labor organizations. Likewise, they have found farmers going contrary to the claims of their leaders, business men taking opposite views from the heads of business associations, war veterans failing to see eye to eye with officers of the American Legion or other veterans' organizations.

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"Hundreds of minority groups have their spokesmen. What about the views of the inarticulate majority?"

Public opinion polls can not only deflate the claims of pressure groups and of minorities seeking special privilege, but, more important, they can reveal the will of the inarticulate and unorganized majority of the citizens.

Persons who write or wire their Congressmen and who go to other lengths to put pressure on their legislators usually have a "fish to fry." They have been aptly described as the "articulate minority." Whether their views actually represent minority viewpoints or majority viewpoints can be ascertained only by examination of the views of all citizens.

An analysis published in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* of more than 30,000 letters received by fourteen Senators during the summer of 1940 concerning the Burke-Wadsworth Selective Service Bill provides an interesting example.

The Burke-Wadsworth Bill proposed that all men between the ages of 21 and 31 should be required to register and should be liable for one year of military service. During the time the bill was under debate and letters to the Congressmen were pouring in, a survey of public opinion, covering an accurate national cross section of voters, shed light on the views of the entire public.

The results below indicate that if these fourteen Senators had based their votes solely on the mail they received, they would have gone counter to the wishes of a majority of the people, as reflected in the poll.

Opinion Expressed in Congressional Mail on Selective Service Bill

For the Bill	10%
Against the Bill	90%

Opinion Expressed on Poll Question: "Do you favor increasing the size of our Army and Navy by drafting men between the ages of 21 and 31 to serve in the armed forces for one year?"

In favor	68%
Against	27%
No opinion	5%

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“Public opinion must have its limitations and so must public opinion polls. Are there areas where the views of the people are likely to have little value?”

It SHOULD be borne in mind at all times that polling organizations are merely fact-finding agencies. Their responsibility begins and ends with the ascertaining of facts regarding public opinion. They have no rightful concern whatsoever with what is done about these facts. In this sense they perform the same function in the realm of public opinion as the Associated Press, the United Press, or the International News Service in reporting objectively the events of the day.

Bryce displayed keen insight into democratic government when he wrote:

“The people who are by power entitled to say what they want, are less qualified to say *how*, and *in what form*, they are to attain it; or, in other words, public opinion can *determine ends*, but is less fit to examine and select the means to these ends.”

The public cannot be expected to render sound judgments on problems or issues about which they are ill informed. Nor, for the same reason, can they be expected to have intelligent views regarding matters of a wholly technical nature.

“Won’t the country suffer when its leaders begin to pay a lot of attention to public opinion polls?”

A TRUE statesman will never change his ideals or his principles to make them conform to the opinions of any group, be it large or small. Rather, such a leader will try to persuade the public to accept his views and his goals. In fact, his success as a leader will in large part be measured by his success in making converts to his way of thinking.

Throughout history the most effective leaders have been those who have had a keen understanding of the public—leaders who have known the views and prejudices of their followers, their lack of knowledge and misinformation, their hopes and aspirations.

Leaders who do not know what the public thinks, or the state of the public’s knowledge on any issue, are likely to be ineffective and unsuccessful leaders, and eventually to lose their opportunity to lead. In the same sense, a military leader who does not take pains to discover the strength and disposition of the enemy troops is likely to lose the battle, and his head.

Great leaders will seek information from every reliable source about the people whom they wish to lead. For this reason they will inevitably pay more attention to facts about the current state of public thinking and of public knowledge. The public opinion poll will be a useful tool in enabling them to reach the highest level of their effectiveness as leaders.

The answer to the question posed above, then, is not that the country will suffer when its leaders begin to pay a lot of attention to public opinion polls. The country will suffer when its leaders ignore, or make wrong guesses about the public’s views on important issues.

"Can the same machinery which is used to gather opinions be used to gather other facts?"

POLLING organizations can devote themselves either to gathering facts about public opinion or to facts about people's lives—facts which often are of equal importance to legislators and to administrators of government departments and agencies.

Often it is a matter of importance to good government to know the extent of unemployment, the income status of the people, their information about new taxes, the extent to which the people plan to cooperate with the government in special programs, and hundreds of similar questions.

The sampling procedure used by public opinion polls has come to be so widely accepted in this field of administration that virtually all information of this type is now collected, or will be in future years, by the same methods now employed by polling organizations to ascertain the views of the people.

The economy and speed of sampling, as contrasted with complete enumeration, have led the United States Bureau of the Census to make extensive use of this method in its work of gathering information for many government agencies. During the recent war the War Department had its own complete organization for polling army personnel on their needs and problems. The Department of Agriculture maintains a staff trained in modern sampling procedures.

"Can you name any specific instances in which public opinion polls have speeded up the processes of democracy?"

ALMOST always the public is ahead of its legislators. This is perhaps natural and desirable in a democracy. Be that as it may, many examples can be cited to show how majority opinion has preceded legislative action in recent years.

In the spring of 1940 when the American Institute of Public Opinion first showed substantial support for peacetime compulsory military service, no legislator—in fact no leader of either major political party in the United States—had publicly advocated such a far-reaching program. Had public opinion been left to manifest itself through the usual channels, the conscription program, all-important to America's war effort, might have been delayed many months.

Again, in an entirely different realm, factual knowledge of public opinion paved the way for needed legislation. Without facts regarding the public's attitude toward measures to control venereal disease, it would be unrealistic to expect a legislator to risk public censure by advocating control measures.

Public opinion polls went directly to the people to discover their views on this subject and the steps they thought should be taken to fight this plague. The public was found ready to accept measures to bring venereal disease under control, and not at all squeamish about discussing the subject openly. Once these facts were known, a score of state legislatures adopted control measures.

Had public opinion polls existed twenty years ago there is every likelihood that they would have uncovered the same public attitudes, with the result that control measures could have

been taken at a much earlier time. Is it too much to assert that facts about the public's attitude on this social problem might have saved hundreds of thousands of lives and millions of dollars in hospitalization costs?

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“Just what is meant by public opinion polls? Can you explain them in language that a layman can understand?”

THERE is little that is new in polling methods. For the most part the work of polling organizations represents merely an orderly and systematic extension of the practices followed by political observers and men in public office through the years.

Fifty years ago James Bryce came to the conclusion that the best way to ascertain public opinion was to move “freely about among all sorts and conditions of men . . . noting how they are affected by the news or arguments brought from day to day to their knowledge” by means of “unbiased persons with good opportunities for observing.” Moreover, he believed that “talk is the best way of reaching the truth, because in talk one gets directly at the facts.”

It has been a custom of long standing for newspapers and magazines to send their special writers on tours of the country to report election trends, and to sound opinion on major issues. These observers were sent out into the highways and byways for one reason: the editors knew that in this way the writers would arrive at a more accurate appraisal of public opinion than they could by sitting in their offices. Politicians long ago reached the same conclusion. Few would disagree with the statement that the best way to find out how people in their districts think is to go out and talk to them.

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In essence this is what a polling organization does. It sends representatives out to talk to the people. The chief differences between the new procedure and the old are these two:

1. Polling organizations reach thousands of people, whereas the political observer or candidate for office could at best talk to only a fraction of this number.

2. Polling organizations take great precautions to make certain that all classes of persons are covered in all sections of the country, and in the proper proportions.

The polling agency must constantly make use of census material, election figures, and other data to be sure that it is reaching the right number of persons in each income level, each age and educational level in each area of the country. It must be sure that it has the right number of persons by occupations, by racial and religious groups, by political preference, by sex. It must make certain that it has not included in its surveys too many members of labor unions, or too few. It must have the right number of persons from large cities and small cities, from towns and from farms.

All of this requires careful and constant study. But certainly no mystic formulae are required.

The trained statistician is a useful worker in this field because of his ability to analyze election figures and census reports, and his ability to test new methods. He may miss some of the overtones of opinion, which a highly skilled political writer might discover, but on the other hand, he is more likely to approach his task with a scientific attitude.

Although the layman doesn't recognize it as polling, he is himself daily conducting his own private poll of public opinion. When he talks to his wife at breakfast about an issue of current interest, he has started his polling for the day. When he meets his friends on the bus or train and learns their views on the same issue, he has added to his "sample." Later, when he arrives at his office, he has added more cases. At

ated at least an impression of public opinion, inaccurate though this impression may be. And he has, whether he knows it or not, gone through the basic motions of conducting a poll.

Because the job has not been done systematically, because he has listened, for the most part, to friends and associates who have the same economic and educational background as himself, and who hold the same general views, he is likely to have a distorted idea of how the public thinks about a given issue. He hasn't observed the simplest and most basic rule of polling—which is to see that each segment of society is properly represented.