

## The Meanings of Public Opinion

Were they alive today, our nation's founders might not be surprised that public opinion is still an important force in American politics. Yet, they would be astonished to learn just how pervasive discussions of public opinion have become. The president, members of Congress, candidates for public office, interest group leaders, journalists, and corporate executives, as well as ordinary citizens, constantly ask the same question: "What does the public think?" Our leaders need to know what sorts of policies and initiatives voters support, but a variety of other groups and individuals also need to have a working knowledge of public opinion at any given time. Interest group leaders must decide which battles to wage and how strongly their efforts will be supported by their constituents. Journalists, who are key players in the measurement and communication of public opinion, need to know what their readers and viewers want to hear about, but they also survey the political landscape for those of us who are curious about the attitudes of our fellow citizens. Even corporate executives must keep their "ears to the ground" to understand trends in American culture—what consumers think about, what they purchase, and, generally, how they choose to live.

Since so many parties need to understand the state of American public opinion, there are a variety of sources that interested groups and individuals can turn to for such information. One of the most obvious indicators of public opinion is the sample survey or opinion poll. These quantitative data can often give us a sense of how Americans feel about policy issues, social practices, or lifestyle issues. Another source of information about public opinion is vote tallies after elections or referenda.

These reports often reveal citizens' preferences in very dramatic ways. Yet students of American politics must go beyond these obvious techniques for assessing public opinion and think about all of the "places" that citizens' opinions can be found—in the scripts of television programming; at political rallies, town meetings, or city council hearings; in the rhetoric of journalism; in the dialogue among friends who frequent a coffeehouse or neighborhood bar; and in the political discussions one hears on talk radio or sees on the Internet. This book focuses on all the ways that public opinion is measured and expressed, taking a broad view of what the phrase "public opinion" really means. If one thinks of public opinion only as the result of opinion polls, one will not achieve a sophisticated understanding of our political culture.

There are three key terms that summarize the concerns of this text: politics, communication, and social process. What do we mean by these words? Politics, in the context of this book, refers to the ways we govern ourselves and divide national resources. Many of the chapters include discussions of how public opinion is translated into policy and how it shapes our institutions. Public opinion is certainly important during political campaigns, and journalists do—for better or worse—keep us abreast of the "horse race" as it unfolds. Yet public opinion plays an extremely important role in public and private policy debates—on both domestic and foreign affairs—among our legislators. A good example is President George W. Bush's decision to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003. On the basis of opinion polling, media reports, and other sources, Bush believed that Americans supported military action, so he pursued an aggressive foreign policy. It is doubtful that he would have engaged the Iraqi army had it not been for the supportive nature of public opinion. Bush, like his father before him and most late-twentieth-century American presidents, was extraordinarily dependent on public opinion.

The notion that public opinion and politics are connected is obvious, but communication issues have received far less scholarly attention than they deserve. How is public opinion expressed in America? Do the media influence the ways opinions are communicated, as well as the actual substance of those opinions? In the late twentieth century, we have come to assume that we are in an "information age," but what does that really mean with regard to public opinion? This book explores how both mass



FIGURE 1.1 Public opinion demonstration during the Vietnam War years. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

media and interpersonal forms of communication shape public sentiment. In the realm of interpersonal communication, for example, we draw upon social psychology to understand how a tendency toward conformity among citizens often guides the ways they behave and how they vote. And since the diffusion of film in the early years of this century, communication researchers have studied how mass media can construct the political world by reflecting our preferences and often dictating those preferences. In recent years, for example, talk radio has become an important forum for political discussion and has often had an immediate effect on politics. In one analysis, researchers have argued that talk radio almost single-handedly forced Zoë Baird, a nominee for U.S. attorney general, to withdraw from the confirmation process in 1992. This is a particularly interesting case of the importance of talk radio, as newspaper and broadcast journalists believed that Baird would be easily confirmed. Although national journalists predicted that Baird's nomination would receive a "rubber stamp" from the Senate, talk radio program hosts were inundated with calls from a public outraged by Baird's violation of the social security laws. In this case, as in many others, talk radio joined the

conventional communication outlets of the moment (newspapers, nightly news broadcasts, and news magazines) as a powerful force in American politics.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, public opinion is the result of social processes, and social processes affect the nature of American attitudes. By this, we mean that public opinion is intertwined with a variety of societal forces and institutions, such as the changing American demographic profile, the problems of inner cities, and the state of family life. For example, in later chapters we spend some time discussing fads in fashion and language that reflect changing public attitudes, but we also consider how changes in material or linguistic culture might affect the ways we view our government, our leaders, and each other. The point is that public opinion is embedded in culture: It is not an entity that can be easily disentangled from social life, so we must always be aware of the conditions surrounding the communication of opinions and beliefs.

#### WHY STUDY PUBLIC OPINION?

Public opinion research is a very broad field, because scholars in many disciplines need to understand how attitudes about public affairs are formed, communicated, and measured. Public opinion study is as old as democracy itself: The ancient Greek philosophers knew that the analysis of popular sentiments was crucial to the design of government by the people. There are, however, some very specific reasons why so many scholars and public officials study and care about the state of public opinion.

##### *1. Policy, in Democratic States, Should Rest on Public Opinion*

Although democratic theorists have disagreed about how much of a role the public should play in the design of public policy, almost all believe that people should have some say in how they are governed. The role of public opinion in discussions of democracy takes two forms.

First, there are people's global opinions about institutions. For example, how much do members of the public trust their leaders? Do they believe that Congress is responsive to their needs? Do Americans think that political campaigns are instructive and efficient or simply "horse races" orchestrated by highly paid political consultants? The answers to these questions are complex and will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this

book, but the point is that public opinion about the general state of politics is important and worthy of our attention. If trust in government is low or if a large segment of the population does not believe that their congressional representatives are responsive to their needs, a democratic state may deteriorate: Voting rates may decline dramatically, and demagogues might emerge with rather undemocratic ways of "fixing" the system. Over the last few decades, Americans have grown far more cynical about their institutions, but we have yet to witness the sort of severe decay in institutional loyalty that destroys many budding democracies.

Second, beyond the general attitudes people hold about political institutions and leadership are the opinions they have about specific policy matters. Chapter Nine explores the links between public opinion and public policy in depth, and that linkage is among the most important reasons why we study popular attitudes. Presidents, members of Congress, state legislators, and even local city council members must always be aware of public opinion as they design the sorts of regulations and programs that affect our daily lives. Sometimes, leaders promote a policy and the public quickly supports their ideas, as in the early days of a military conflict (the "rally round the flag" effect). Under other conditions, there is a groundswell of opinion, and leaders respond to expressions of public sentiment with legislative action (see Figure 1.1). In the vast majority of cases, however, the interaction between public opinion and the formation of public policy is far more complex because communication among involved parties is so imperfect. Journalists, for example, can often, either knowingly or unknowingly, distort public opinion through their reports, so policymakers find it difficult to figure out whose voices they are listening to—those of media professionals or average citizens. Alternately, journalists can misrepresent or fail to cover aspects of a policy debate, and that can affect the ways that the public responds to legislative endeavors.

##### *2. Respect for Public Opinion Is a Safeguard Against Demagoguery*

In all nations, and in all eras, there is a risk that a single demagogue or dictator may grab the reins of power. We have witnessed many such occurrences over the course of the twentieth century. Understanding and respecting public opinion is not an absolute safeguard against the rise of a dictator, yet public opinion is one of the few potentially effective checks on leadership available in a democracy.

In less dramatic cases, for instance, where leaders show bad judgment or are incompetent or corrupt, public opinion can force public officials out of office, either directly or indirectly. In the summer and fall of 1995, for example, U.S. senator Bob Packwood (R–Oregon) was pressured to resign from the Senate over allegations of sexual misconduct and financial improprieties. At the start of Packwood’s troubles years earlier, his colleagues had mixed reactions to the charges, with some calling for his resignation and others arguing that the case against him was overblown. Yet public opinion, both in Oregon and around the nation, gradually turned against Packwood, and the Senate was forced to acknowledge popular sentiment. This acknowledgment most certainly played a role in the way the Senate Ethics Committee investigated the Packwood matter and in its eventual findings.

There are a variety of ways that public opinion serves as a check on leadership. In many instances, such as the Packwood case or the 2003 effort to recall Governor Gray Davis of California, a group or groups of citizens are upset about the actions of a public official and other leaders share those sentiments. Under these circumstances, there is an interaction between public officials and the electorate, with both reinforcing the other’s opinions. In other cases, there is truly a “bottom-up” display of public annoyance or outrage with the actions of a leader, and government reacts or fails to react to that display. Finally, in some instances, political actors attempt to block the actions of other elites and try to persuade the public to join them in such maneuvering. In all three cases, public opinion serves as a powerful force that directs the actions of our elected and appointed leaders.

### 3. *Public Opinion Provides Clues About Culture*

Understanding public opinion on policy and social issues is crucial to students of American culture, because understanding popular sentiment toward specific issues gives us insight into larger currents in American life. Since it is difficult for social scientists to “measure” and report on the many dimensions of American culture, we need to make inferences about that larger culture from narrower studies of public attitudes.

An example of this approach—trying to understand cultural values and trends by studying particular issue attitudes—is research on public feeling toward welfare programs. Since the creation of a set of antipoverty

programs in the 1960s, public opinion researchers have asked citizens how they feel about such initiatives. Although such questions present a variety of difficulties to survey researchers, as the way such programs are described can elicit very different answers from respondents, results of these studies tell us a lot about American norms and values. If survey researchers, over the course of several years, ask about whether welfare benefits should be tied to work on the part of aid recipients and respondents increasingly support this idea, we learn something about changing values: The trend may indicate a growing impatience with the poor, a renewal of the work ethic, or a general resurgence of conservative political ideology. All of these hypotheses need more rigorous study, but social scientists are often “tipped off” about larger cultural trends by survey results.

Although we will take up this issue in Chapter Three in our discussion of methodologies for understanding public opinion, one might argue that public opinion and culture are so intertwined as to be inseparable. In addition to being the source of aesthetic “products” (e.g., art, music, dance, and the like), culture is a sum of people’s norms, values, and sentiments (see Box 1.1). Relatedly, the best public opinion research usually reveals norms, values, and sentiments. In this book, we try to take a broad approach to understanding public opinion, and although we do not use the phrase “public opinion” and the word “culture” interchangeably, we often draw parallels between the two concepts.

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#### BOX 1.1 CULTURE, ART, AND PUBLIC OPINION

History often provides excellent examples of how culture and public opinion are interwoven. Let us take one interesting historical case of this relationship—the popularity of Shakespearean drama in nineteenth-century America—to illustrate that nexus. Our example comes from a book by historian Lawrence Levine, entitled *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.

Levine argues that Shakespeare was incredibly popular in the nineteenth century, far more than today and across class lines, because his drama appealed to some basic beliefs among Americans at the time. In particular, Shakespearean drama emphasized the struggle of the individual: “His plays had meaning to a nation that placed the individual at the center of the uni-

verse and personalized the large questions of the day.”<sup>1</sup> Levine gives an example of how popular political feeling of the period manifested itself in May 1849, when two leading Shakespearean actors (the American Edwin Forrest and the British star William Charles Macready) were giving competing performances in two different New York theaters:

Forrest’s vigorous acting style, his militant love of his country, his outspoken belief in its citizenry, and his frequent articulation of the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility endeared him to the American people, while Macready’s cerebral acting style, his aristocratic demeanor, and his identification with the wealthy gentry made him appear Forrest’s diametric opposite. On May 7, Macready and Forrest appeared against one another in separate productions of *Macbeth*. Forrest’s performance, at the Broadway Theater, was a triumph both dramatically and politically. When Forrest spoke Macbeth’s lines, “What rhubarb, senna or what purgative drug will scour these English hence?” the entire audience, according to the actor Lester Wallack, “rose and cheered for many minutes.” Macready’s performance, at the Astor Place Opera House, was never heard—he was silenced by a storm of boos and cries of “Three groans for the codfish aristocracy,” which drowned out appeals for order from those in the boxes, and by an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery, which forced him to leave the stage in the third act.<sup>2</sup>

The next evening, 1,800 people gathered at the Opera House to shout Macready down. A riot ensued, and when it was over, twenty-two people were dead and over 150 injured.

For our purposes, this colorful yet tragic incident in American theatrical history has a variety of implications. To begin with, it demonstrates how the performing arts rest upon ideology: Americans of the mid-nineteenth century, as well as those living in the late twentieth century, have often been hostile toward art and artists who somehow reflect unpopular beliefs. This example also underscores the fact that public opinion and culture are inextricably intertwined: Americans have never drawn a sharp dividing line between politics and art. Finally, the riot illustrates how political expression (violent expression, in this instance) manifests itself in a variety of forms. In this case, a dramatic performance served as a trigger for public discourse

and action, but often speeches, telecasts, and actions of our leaders serve as catalysts for the display of pent-up ideological feeling.

#### NOTES

1. Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 63.

2. *Ibid.*

#### 4. *Public Opinion Must, at Times, be Mobilized*

During national emergencies, and at times of war, presidents must urge citizens to act in prescribed ways. The most obvious circumstance is wartime, when Americans must make compromises—by sending sons and daughters off to war, by conserving scarce resources, and by volunteering where needed. During World War II, this sort of mobilization was not particularly difficult. That war was, to use Studs Terkel’s phrase, a “good war,” one in which our goals seemed just and there was consensus that we were engaged in a struggle for freedom. Other mobilizations for war have been more difficult or more complicated. A vocal and intelligent antiwar sentiment existed in the days before our entry into World War I, for example, as a variety of writers and artists attempted to persuade Americans that the United States should stay out of European affairs (see Figure 1.2). And much more recently, in the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson attempted to convince an increasingly resistant public that U.S. military action in Vietnam was proper and morally sound.

Regardless of one’s feelings about U.S. involvement in the two world wars or in Vietnam, it is clear that a president who needs to mobilize public opinion must first understand the nature of public opinion. The same holds true for students of politics, who try to make sense of government-inspired collective action. Under what circumstances do people support the president with patriotic fervor, and why? How should military leaders present the nature of a conflict to the public in order to make the cause a popular one? An understanding of public attitudes, beliefs, and values is important if leaders are to persuade us with their rhetoric, but they must also have a good grasp of public opinion dynamics—the interaction of

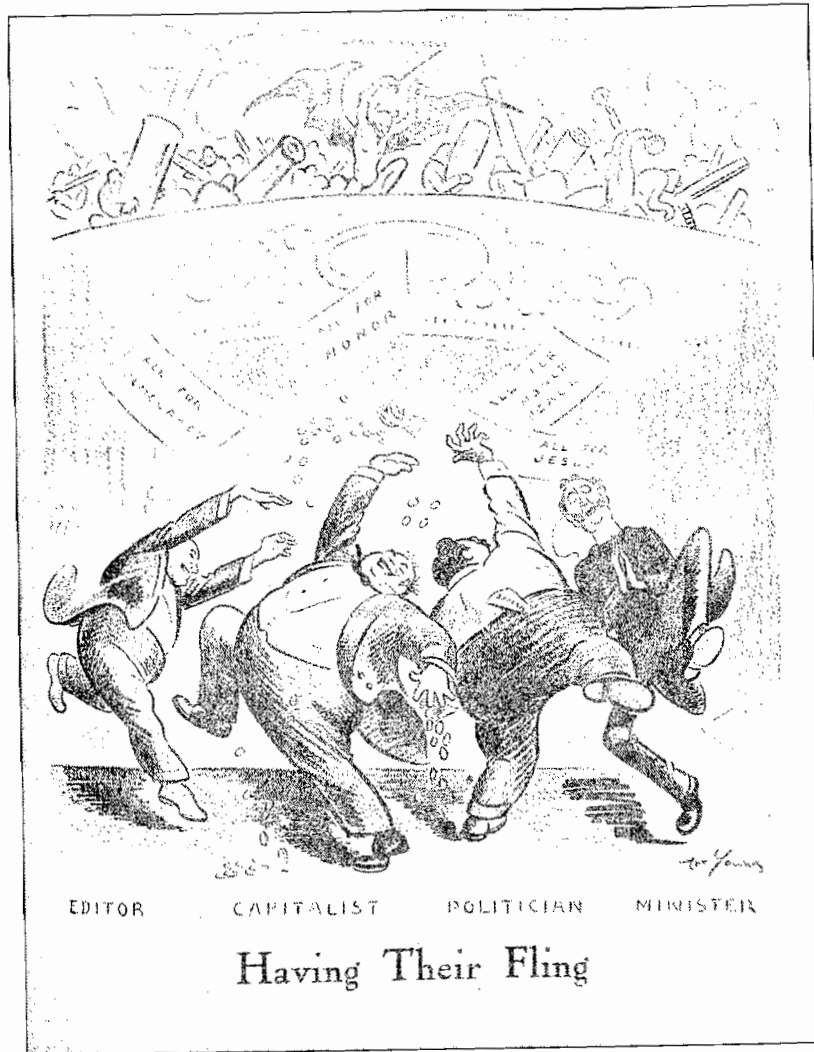


FIGURE 1.2 “Having their fling.” This cartoon, drawn by artist Art Young in 1917, depicts a variety of parties who supported U.S. participation in World War I, which Young opposed. The drawing eventually was used in a landmark sedition case against Young and several other writers and artists who produced the antiwar, socialist magazine called the *Masses*. A jury found the group not guilty, although the *Masses* eventually folded due to a variety of other financial and political problems. Reprinted from the *Masses*, July 1917 issue.

media and public opinion, the notion that different channels of communication have different effects on audiences, and the like.

### 5. Public Opinion Dictates the Bounds of U.S. Foreign Policy

The relationship between foreign policy and public opinion is a complex one and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine. Yet this connection is so important that it should be mentioned here as one of the reasons that students of American politics need to be concerned with the nature of public opinion.

In general, making foreign policy is the domain of our leaders, who usually have both more expertise and more information than the average citizen. However, this does not mean that public officials design foreign policy without attention to popular sentiment: The president, Congress, and the State Department typically make foreign policy within ideological boundaries determined by American values and priorities. In other words, public opinion determines the broad framework within which foreign affairs are debated. How do our leaders discern this framework so they can act? Policymakers have a variety of tools for doing this. They can rely on opinion polls, which ask both general and specific questions about foreign affairs. A general question might concern citizens’ notions about the purposes of foreign aid or whether the United States should tie trade agreements to human rights standards. Specific questions typically focus on contemporary events that demand some sort of response from American leadership.

Beyond polling, though, presidents and other policymakers can use history as a guide when trying to discern what policies or interventions Americans will accept or reject. Thus, for example, when the possibility of intervention in a foreign conflict arises, presidents and members of Congress often look for previous cases on which to base policy. In cases like the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, for instance, policymakers debated the suitability of intervention—particularly in the early days of the conflict. Many drew parallels between Nazi atrocities committed during World War II and the reports of torture inflicted upon Bosnian civilians by the Serbs. Many argued that the United States might have saved a large number of Jews had it intervened in the internal politics of Nazi Germany (e.g., bombing train lines to concentration camps) instead of just concerning itself with the threats to American interests and Ameri-

can soldiers. Whether such humanitarian actions were really possible or not, the analogy between Nazi Germany and the situation in Bosnia gave policymakers a framework for thinking about what sorts of foreign policy maneuvers Americans will or will not tolerate. Another example is the national debate over aid to the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s (see Box 1.2). Many decision makers, both those who agreed with President Reagan's pleas for increased aid and those who disagreed, did worry about repeating American mistakes in Vietnam. Our policy toward Vietnam was a catalyst for a tremendous public outcry, although it took many years for this rebuff of administration policy to emerge.

At the time of this writing, in the middle of 2004, we are witnessing an extraordinary example of how public opinion can dictate the boundaries of action in foreign policy. In particular, the devastating events of September 11, 2001—the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, attack on the Pentagon, and hijacking of commercial airplanes—have made it possible for President George W. Bush to pursue a wide range of interventionist foreign policy endeavors. These range from the invasion and restructuring of Afghanistan to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Public opinion, which rallied so strongly around Bush in the months and years after September 11, made it possible for him to undertake dramatic activity abroad, even when the United Nations and many allies disagreed with these ventures.

#### BOX 1.2 DID THE PUBLIC PLAY A ROLE IN THE CONTRA AID DEBATE?

In 1979, socialist rebels took over the government in the Central American nation of Nicaragua. They replaced a dictator, Anastasio Somoza, who had headed a largely corrupt government known for a horrific number of human rights abuses. President Reagan feared the changes a socialist government might make in Nicaragua and also argued that this left-wing regime would threaten U.S. interests in Latin America more generally. In 1982, a group of rebels who came to be known as the "contras" staged their first attack against the new Sandinista government in order to challenge its rule. Throughout the 1980s, Reagan asked Congress for funds to help the contras overthrow the Sandinistas. Much aid was approved. Fighting and bloodshed

escalated until 1989, when President Daniel Ortega, representing the Sandinistas, agreed to hold open elections. In 1990, the UNO Party—a political faction supported by the first Bush administration—won the popular vote and the contras officially disbanded.

The case of U.S. military and nonmilitary aid to the Nicaraguan contras is an ironic one from the viewpoint of democratic theory. In this instance, the majority of Americans were solidly opposed to aiding the contras, even though President Reagan argued strongly for helping these rebels overthrow their government. Most surveys indicated that somewhere between 53 percent and 63 percent of Americans polled during 1986 and 1987 thought that we should not aid the contras.<sup>1</sup> Yet Congress regularly approved aid packages, despite the wishes of the public as discerned through opinion polls. Why such a mismatch? Does this case demonstrate that democratic theory is flawed—that leaders do not listen to the public when making foreign policy? William LeoGrande, a professor of political science and former staff member of the House Democratic Caucus on Central America, is in a good position to explain. He asks:

Did the public matter? Not in the way that theories of democratic representation would normally prescribe. Public opinion was consistently opposed to the Reagan administration's policy of aiding the Nicaraguan contras, yet the administration pursued it doggedly throughout the decade and the Congress supported it to one degree or another from 1982 to 1984 and again from 1985 to 1987. Both Congress and the executive could afford to be unresponsive to public opinion because the issue never achieved a high enough level of salience for the mass public to focus on it. When their opinions were elicited by pollsters, people expressed dissatisfaction with the direction in which the Reagan administration was headed, *but they had only the vaguest idea of what was going on in the region*. . . . Even though opposition to Reagan's Nicaragua policy remained uniformly high for almost a decade, Democrats never quite believed the polls. They worried that a crisis in the region would allow Reagan to act decisively, the public would "rally 'round the flag," and the Democrats would be politically vulnerable. Thus the Democrats felt compelled to support some policy other than simply abandoning the contras, lest Nicaragua develop into "another Cuba." . . . The ghost of Joe McCarthy and the hysteria over "Who lost China?" stalked the Democrats throughout the contra aid debates. (emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>

LeoGrande's remarks, which are the concluding section of his study, demonstrate just how complex the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy can be. In the case of Nicaragua, Reagan was not able to achieve his central goal—the immediate overthrow of the Sandinista government. But he was able to get aid to the contra rebels because it seemed less distasteful to Democratic congressmen than sending in U.S. troops and because public attitudes about Nicaragua were so vague and ill-formed. Thus, here is a case of a mismatch between public opinion and policy that was the result of weak expression of public opinion and also, one might argue, weak leadership skills on the part of Democratic congressional leaders. Conceivably, those leaders might have solidified public opinion further, in opposition to aid, and might have mobilized voters. But they did not.

Also interesting in LeoGrande's comments are the multiple references to history. We noted earlier how important collective memory is when it comes to making foreign policy. In the case of Nicaragua, policymakers had a variety of memories to contend with in their attempts to avoid upsetting Americans. Because Republicans feared "another Vietnam," they were cautious in their rhetoric about our involvement in the Central American nation, but Democrats were concerned that the traditional American fear of communism might persuade the public that Reagan's policy was the right one.

#### NOTES

1. Richard Sobel, ed., *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).

2. William M. LeoGrande, "Did the Public Matter? The Impact of Opinion on Congressional Support for Ronald Reagan's Nicaragua Policy," in Sobel, *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 185–18186.

#### THE MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION

Although "public opinion" is an essential concept in democratic theory, it has been very difficult to define. Given the importance of public opinion, it may seem odd that scholars do not agree on a definition. The reason for this lack of consensus is rooted in the fact that so many researchers and theorists from so many different disciplines have contributed to the field but have come to the study of public opinion with different assumptions

and methodologies. Yet this is not the only reason that public opinion is hard to define. Some of the ambiguity in the term simply reflects the problematic nature of the concept, which is inherently vague and nebulous. In addition, the meaning of public opinion is also tied to historical circumstance—the sort of political culture that exists, the nature of communication technology, and the importance of public participation in the everyday workings of government.

A good place to begin our discussion of how to define "public opinion" is to consider what constitutes a "public." The concept of a public grew out of Enlightenment democratic ideals and the many important social transformations that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A working definition of a public grew from its contrasts to other kinds of social formations, most prominently crowds and masses.

#### *The Crowd*

In the early twentieth century, the new science of "crowd psychology" (a forerunner of social psychology) developed to explain how individuals could be caught up in mass behavior and transformed. How was it that people were collectively enticed to do things they would never dream of doing alone? For example, how can cheerleaders at a football game get people in the stands to jump, shout, yell, and dance, behaviors in which these people would not normally engage? During the early twentieth century, societies were becoming more urban and the labor and socialist movements were beginning to assert themselves. There were strikes, riots, and other instances of collective behavior that many elites feared signaled future disaster.

The most prominent of the crowd psychology scholars was Gustave Le Bon, who wrote about public opinion in the early decades of the twentieth century. He believed that crowd behavior resulted from (1) the anonymity of crowd members resulting in a perception of "invincibility" and lack of personal responsibility, (2) the contagion of ideas and feelings in the crowd producing rapid shifts in behavior, and (3) the suggestibility of the crowd, enabling people to hold ideas and behave in ways they would not normally behave.<sup>2</sup> In fact, William Trotter likened crowds to animal herds—with the actions of the "lead" individuals transmitting to the others by "suggestion."<sup>3</sup>

The crowd is essentially defined by its "unity of emotional experience."<sup>4</sup> According to contemporary opinion researcher Vincent Price,

“The crowd develops in response to shared emotions.”<sup>5</sup> However, the study of crowds has expanded to consider fads, crazes, and social movements, and some scholars believe that crowdlike phenomena could be central to the early formation and expression of public opinion.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Mass*

Crowds are defined by their shared emotional experiences, but masses are defined by their interpersonal isolation. Sociologist Herbert Blumer notes that a mass is composed of anonymous individuals who engage in very little interaction or communication,<sup>7</sup> and Price notes that a mass is extremely heterogeneous, including people from all strata of society and all walks of life.<sup>8</sup> A mass “merely consists of an aggregation of individuals who are separate, detached, anonymous,” reacting in response to their own needs, Blumer argues.<sup>9</sup>

This concept of mass also grew out of the social transformations occurring at the turn of the century. People became more mobile. They moved to the cities and became disconnected from their roots in family and village life. They worked long hours and returned home to anonymous neighborhoods. This kind of disconnection was troubling, because it removed the checks on antisocial behavior that are possible in families and villages where everyone knows everyone else. Blumer suggests that what binds a mass together is a common focus of interest or attention. Examples of a mass mentioned by Blumer include individuals “who are excited by some national event, those who share in a land boom, those who are interested in a murder trial which is reported in the press, or those who participate in some large migration.”<sup>10</sup> People who are members of a mass share an experience or an idea in common, but they may be unaware of this fact because they are unaware of each other. Despite this lack of awareness, mass behavior can have social consequences, for example, when the individual buying decisions of millions of people turn an unknown recording artist into a star. Similarly, individual voting decisions can elect a new and largely unknown political candidate to office.

### *The Public*

A public can be positively contrasted to a crowd and a mass. The crowd develops in response to shared emotions; the public organizes in response to an issue. Entering the crowd requires only “the ability to feel and em-

pathize,” whereas joining the public requires also “the ability to think and reason with others.” The behavior of the public could be guided at least partially by a shared emotional drive, but “when the public ceases to be critical, it dissolves or is transformed into a crowd.”<sup>11</sup>

Unlike a mass, a public is self-aware. Blumer defines a public as “a group of people (a) who are confronted by an issue, (b) who are divided in the ideas as to how to meet the issue, and (c) who engage in discussion over the issue.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the essence of a public’s activity is discourse over a controversy. This process of discourse, according to Blumer, means that public opinion is always rational, though it is not always intelligent. When a public becomes a crowd, it creates “public sentiment” rather than public opinion.

Another important difference between a public and a mass was emphasized by the sociologist C. Wright Mills in the 1950s. In a public, individuals should be as capable of expressing opinions as they are of receiving them. Debate continues over whether a “true” public so defined actually exists in twentieth-century America. Some, like Mills, argue that American citizens are more like a mass of isolated individuals who receive opinions via the media. Others take a more positive view of public discourse, citing interpersonal discussions and phenomena like talk radio.

Despite a chronic definitional problem, public opinion research is still a field with boundaries. Not all studies of American culture are studies of public opinion, because the study of public opinion does concern the formation, communication, and measurement of citizens’ attitudes toward public affairs. We believe that there are five reasonable definitions of public opinion that are distinct but that also overlap to some extent. It is best not to treat these categories as mutually exclusive, since the lines between them are not as clear as we might like.

*Category 1: Public Opinion Is an Aggregation of Individual Opinions.* Many researchers, journalists, policymakers, and citizens think of public opinion as the simple sum of many individual opinions. This is the most common definition of public opinion in contemporary American politics, and it serves as the justification for using surveys and polls to measure public opinion. By using the process of random selection, opinion polls enable an efficient aggregation of individual opinions. The fact that all professionally conducted polls randomly select individuals—across social

groups—to be interviewed means that one can take the results of those interviews and make general claims about the entire population.

This definition is widely shared in public life today for several reasons. First, it gives one straightforward direction about how to measure the public mood: If public opinion is the aggregation of individual opinions, it is clear that we must interview individuals and add their opinions together to ascertain public opinion. Relatedly, the methodology of polling has become routinized over the last decade, so that any trained researcher with resources and computers can conduct a competent survey of the public. Second, this definition of public opinion resonates with the structure of the popular election, which serves as the basis for democratic process. Surveys are like elections in the way they tally “votes” (opinions), so they seem to fit our particular system of governance. Third, this sort of quantitative approach to understanding public opinion enables researchers, journalists, and others to engage in complex causal analyses of public opinion. If an analyst polls a sample of American citizens about welfare reform, for example, that makes it possible to test hypotheses about the relationship between support for reform and one’s race, class, gender, political affiliation, or religion. Furthermore, the researcher can analyze how political attitudes and values are connected: Do those citizens who trust government officials tend to support reform? Or do those who have immense trust in government fear welfare reform proposals that reduce government’s role in managing entitlement programs?

Polling is used by legislators, presidents, and journalists to get a sense of how people feel about various policy issues, but surveys also give us some insight into more general attitudes about social life. The mass media offer up an enormous number of surveys each day that describe public attitudes on race relations, gender roles, religious values, and the like. Sometimes these polls shed light on policy debates, but more often they are interesting notes on culture, in and of themselves.

*Category 2: Public Opinion Is a Reflection of Majority Beliefs.* Several theorists argue that we need to think of public opinion as the equivalent of social norms—that the values and beliefs of the majority of citizens are the true basis of public opinion. Another way of saying this is that the only public opinion that really matters, when it comes to policymaking, is

what most Americans think. Theorists who use this definition are not making a judgment about the majority being right or wrong on a particular subject: They are simply reporting that people do pay close attention to the opinions of friends, coworkers, and neighbors and tend to conform to majority opinion among their significant others.

One researcher who supports this definition of public opinion is Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, whose work we discuss in subsequent chapters. She argues that public opinion is best defined as the “opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself.”<sup>13</sup> Noelle-Neumann believes that citizens do a surveillance of their environment, try to get a sense of what majority opinion is like on a particular topic, and then either express themselves or keep quiet on the subject. She calls this theory the “spiral of silence” because she thinks that people remain silent when they realize that they hold a minority opinion and, as a result, minority opinion appears to be even less pervasive than it really is. Noelle-Neumann bases her theory on the tracts of great philosophers (e.g., John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau), as well as on the large number of conformity experiments in the field of social psychology.

There is considerable debate about Noelle-Neumann’s hypothesis. First, there have been a variety of assaults on her methodology, that is, how she studies the problem of conformity in public opinion. Second, one wonders whether people really feel the need to conform to majority opinion on all policy and social issues. Finally, there is a bit of confusion about citizens’ sources of information—where we learn about majority opinion. Do we learn about majority opinion from media reports and polls? Or are our significant others a more important source of information (and persuasion) than the mass media? These questions are complex, and Chapter Six explores them in greater depth.

If one believes that public opinion is simply the aggregation of individual opinions (the first definition above), it is easy to measure it through polls and surveys. Yet if someone believes that the opinions we express are not always honest, polling becomes much more problematic. When people say one thing to a pollster but in their hearts believe just the opposite, researchers need to develop much more sophisticated methods for understanding public opinions (those we are willing to articulate aloud) and private opinions (those opinions we keep to ourselves).

*Category 3: Public Opinion Is Found in the Clash of Group Interests.* Some scholars believe that public opinion is not so much a function of what individuals think as a reflection of how their opinions are cultivated, crystallized, and eventually communicated by interest groups. These may be political parties, trade organizations, corporations, or activist groups like the Sierra Club or the Christian Coalition. The strength of this definition is that it underscores power dynamics: In political reality, organized groups are the ones that lobby for legislation, have spokespeople who influence journalists, and mobilize votes during election campaigns. Under this definition, then, public opinion is the result of public debate among groups.

This definition of public opinion assumes that conflict is pervasive in social and political life, that groups are constantly engaged in a struggle to define social problems and provide solutions to them. People who ascribe to this definition do not discount the opinions and attitudes of individuals but are most interested in how those opinions are translated into interest group opinion, since interest groups act in a more powerful fashion than do individuals. Citizens can accomplish more when they join forces, because policymakers and journalists are more likely to be interested in group opinion than in single opinions.

One theorist advocating this definition of public opinion is Herbert Blumer, mentioned earlier in our discussion of masses and publics. In 1948, Blumer presented a now famous attack on survey research, in which he argued that polls are an artificial means for describing public opinion, since they do not tell us much about who the respondents are and which interest groups they support (see Box 1.3). Opinion polls purposefully treat all individual respondents equally: Each opinion is given the same weight, and all opinions are seen as equally important. Blumer believes that this is an unrealistic approach to understanding society, since all citizens are not equal. Pollsters can find out the gender and race of respondents and whether they are wealthy and educated or poor and without much formal schooling. But it is much harder to discern whether respondents are influential in their social circle or whether they are active citizens who effectively lobby local public officials and journalists, give money to particular causes, and the like. Sophisticated survey research can, in theory, probe many aspects of respondents' behavior,

but this is both expensive and time-consuming for those respondents. Survey response rates have been declining in recent years and pollsters have been working to make participation in polls a positive (and brief) experience.

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**BOX 1.3 DO GROUPS MATTER MORE THAN INDIVIDUALS, WHEN IT COMES TO PUBLIC OPINION?**

In his 1948 essay on opinion polling, sociologist Herbert Blumer tried to take the perspective of a legislator or executive. What kind of public opinion data is important to them: the results of surveys or the opinions communicated by interest groups?<sup>1</sup> He argued:

[The administrator] has to view society in terms of groups of divergent influence; in terms of organizations with different degrees of power; in terms of individuals with followings; in terms of indifferent people—all, in other words, in terms of what and who counts in his part of the social world. This type of assessment which is called for in the instance of an organized society in operation is well-nigh impossible to make in the case of the findings of public opinion polls. We are unable to answer such questions as the following: how much power and influence is possessed by those who have the favorable opinion or the unfavorable opinion; who are these people who have the opinion; whom do they represent; how well organized are they; what groups do they belong to that are stirring around on the scene and that are likely to continue to do so; are those people who have the given opinion very much concerned about their opinion; are they going to get busy and do something about it; are they going to get vociferous, militant, and troublesome; are they in the position to influence powerful groups and individuals *who are known*; does the opinion represent a studied policy of significant organizations which will persist and who are likely to remember; is the opinion an ephemeral or momentary view which people will quickly forget? These sample questions show how markedly difficult it is to assess the results of opinion polling from the standpoint of the things that have to be taken into account in working in an organized society. (emphasis in original)

SOURCE: "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review* 13 (1948):542–554, quoted passage at p. 547.

#### NOTES

1. On interest groups as public opinion, see also Susan Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

*Category 4: Public Opinion Is Media and Elite Opinion.* Twentieth-century students of politics have wondered whether public opinion is a reflection of citizens' opinions or simply the projection of what journalists, politicians, pollsters, and other "elites" believe. This notion—that public opinion is a creation of social leaders—may sound cynical, but it has a large number of adherents. The most famous is probably Walter Lippmann, a journalist and political philosopher who also served as a consultant to a variety of American legislators and presidents from World War I through the early years of the Vietnam War. He argued that the common citizen could not possibly stay informed on all affairs of state and, given this impossibility, could hardly be relied upon to produce intelligent opinions on all public affairs. As a result, "public opinion" is best conceptualized as a symbolic phrase used by orators to make their own arguments and fight their own battles with each other. Lippmann was not arguing that people are stupid or that they need to be guided by benevolent dictators. Yet he did believe that people lacked the time and the energy to focus on political matters in the ways called upon by high democratic theory.

One can find a large number of policy matters about which the American public knows very little. Our earlier discussion of the contra aid debate in Box 1.2 serves as a good example of Lippmann's point. Very few citizens even knew where Nicaragua was located! The public's confusion about the issue undoubtedly enabled the Reagan administration to construct public opinion in a manner most supportive of their policies. In general, the public knows far less about foreign affairs than it should if citizens are to form thoughtful opinions about America's overseas activities. Lippmann understood this, and as a result, he advocated that American government should be advised by bureaus of experts instead of by the

average citizen. As his biographer Ronald Steele notes, Lippmann was so disillusioned with mass democracy that he could only turn to a government of "specialists" as a solution to the problem of an ignorant public.<sup>14</sup> Lippmann wrote in 1925:

My sympathies are with [the private citizen], for I believe that he has been saddled with an impossible task and that he is asked to practice an unattainable ideal. I find it so myself for, although public business is my main interest and I give most of my time to watching it, I cannot find time to do what is expected of me in the theory of democracy, that is, to know what is going on and to have an opinion worth expressing on every question which confronts a self-governing community. And I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omniscient citizen.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, not only did Lippmann realize the problematic nature of an informed citizenry as described in democratic theory, but he also took issue with the possibility of public opinion being a useful entity and advocated that citizens be listened to less often in the construction of social policy.

*Category 5: Public Opinion Is a Fiction.* Whereas Lippmann and other scholars see public opinion as the expression of elite opinion, some theorists have gone even further in an attempt to question the meaning of the phrase "public opinion." They argue that public opinion is a phantom—a rhetorical construction used so freely in our newspapers and on television as to be meaningless. They posit, for example, that journalists and congressional representatives often talk about the state of public opinion on a particular issue when they have no evidence at all to back up such assertions about popular feeling. Critics in this category ask difficult questions. For example, if people use the phrase so indiscriminately, without qualitative or quantitative evidence to support their versions of how the public feels, does the phrase have any value at all? Even if a president or member of Congress has an opinion survey demonstrating support for the position he or she is taking, how solid are the opinions measured? Are they informed opinions? And equally important, would people act on those opinions?

Scholars who believe that public opinion is equivalent to media and elite opinion (category 4) may think that public officials and journalists construct images of public opinion to fit their own needs, but these elites are normally basing their arguments on some sort of empirical reality. Theorists in the present category are far more critical, believing that public opinion—in any form—really does not exist: It has no basis in the actual public sphere.

#### BOX 1.4 AN IGNORANT PUBLIC?

Civic knowledge levels among Americans, as measured by surveys, have always been lower than political scientists would like. Two researchers who have probed citizens about what they know are Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. In 1989, they conducted a study to measure knowledge about basic constitutional issues and contemporary events and people. Some of their results are recorded below. Do you think Americans should be able to answer these questions correctly?

Question	Percentage of Respondents Giving the Correct Answer
For how many years is a president of the United States elected—that is, how many years are there in one term of office?	96
Can you tell me the name of the current governor of your state?	74
Will you tell me who the vice president of the United States is?	74
What are the first ten amendments to the Constitution called?	46
Can you remember offhand the name of the U.S. congressman from your district?	29
Do you happen to know the names of the two U.S. senators from your state?	25

SOURCE: Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), questionnaire results throughout appendix, pp. 307–328.

Scholars in this category write at great length about rhetoric—about the fact that anyone can manufacture a public (and its opinions). For example, polls can be designed with questions asked in such a way that the results will be those desired. This sort of biasing of questions is often done unintentionally, but it might be done deliberately as well. Besides crafting quantitative data to support their claims, legislators or interest group spokespersons might simply use inclusive terminology when talking about a social problem, beginning their public statements with, “As Americans, we believe . . .” Public opinion can also be manufactured through sophisticated public relations efforts and the use of visual imagery, to make it seem as though there is majority opinion on a topic.

In addition to arguing that public opinion can be manufactured through rhetoric, critics in this category have other strong arguments based on linguistics and cognitive psychology. For example, scholars have noted that citizens think about politics using different terminology than do pollsters and policymakers. Some wonder whether average citizens and political elites (legislators, journalists, and pollsters, for example) even recognize the same problems as political in nature. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, put his objections to polling and the notion of public opinion this way:

Journalists who want things to be simple, further simplify the already simplified [polling] data which they have been given, and when it reaches the public, it is likely to read as follows: “50 percent of the French are for the discontinuation of the railroads.” A rigorous interpretation of the opinion polls would require an epistemological examination of each of the questions asked, plus, concerning the system of the questions, an analysis of the whole system of answers, which together would be *the only way to know what were the questions the people really thought they were answering.* (emphasis added)<sup>16</sup>

Bourdieu does believe that academics, with great care, can occasionally conduct useful surveys, but he does not think that these surveys necessarily measure a concrete entity called “public opinion.” He and his colleagues have conducted surveys in which they ask questions like this one: “For you, is it political or not to go on strike, wear long hair, participate in a rock festival, etc.” Yet even when such scholars try to figure out what

TABLE 1.1 Thinking About and Measuring Public Opinion: American Health Care

<i>Definition of Public Opinion</i>	<i>In the Context of Health Care Reform</i>
Category 1 (aggregation)	Researchers would argue that public opinion about health care delivery is the product of what most private citizens would say when questioned on the subject. These scholars would use sophisticated survey methods to probe American men and women about their visions of health care reform. Also, such researchers would question survey respondents about the various plans that have been introduced to reform the system, in order to get their opinions on the different plans. Focus groups might be used, also, in order to collect more data in a more conversational forum.
Category 2 (majoritarian)	Scholars would propose that public opinion is the most popular opinion—what people tend to say in public. Thus, if it is socially most acceptable to argue for a national system that guarantees low-cost coverage for all, that would be the “public opinion” worth paying attention to. Researchers in this category might use polls and surveys to discern this majority opinion, or they might conduct a content analysis of the mass media to get a sense of which opinion receives the most (and most favorable) news coverage.
Category 3 (clash of groups)	This approach would focus most rigorously on the “interests” and coalitions in the debate—the insurance industry, the American Association of Retired People (AARP), the administration, and a variety of other consumer and lobby groups. How do the leaders of these groups characterize the opinions of their constituents? Researchers taking this approach to understanding public opinion would study the public statements made by such groups but would also conduct interviews with group leaders and members. Most important, though, scholars in this category would attempt to understand the way groups clash—trying to discern points of contention, areas of common ground, and the evolution of groups’ strategies and approaches.

(continues)

TABLE 1.1 (continued)

<i>Definition of Public Opinion</i>	<i>In the Context of Health Care Reform</i>
Category 4 (elite/media opinion)	Using this definition of public opinion, one would recognize that a variety of powerful players claim support among the public. All of them, however, may be exaggerating just how widely certain views are held. For example, the insurance industry representatives argued repeatedly in the 1993 debate about health care that choice among doctors was of utmost importance to the public. And there were some polls that indicated this was the case. Yet other polls indicated that people might be more flexible on the choice issue. The fact that the issue was complicated—in that citizens might trade off choice for some other benefits—was not part of industry rhetoric, however. One might argue that the insurance industry had a perspective, and set of interests, that drove it to construct public opinion in a way that suited its own agenda.
Category 5 (public opinion as fiction)	Scholars in this category would argue that people may have some feelings about health care reform and the kind of health care services they value but that the expression of these opinions is entirely constructed by interest groups, public officials, and media. These parties are exaggerating actual opinion at times, but often they are constructing “public opinion” out of nothing at all. The most worrisome aspect of this rhetorical construction of public opinion is that actual opinion—complex though it might be—gets overlooked.

it is people believe to be political activity or what they believe are political issues, they are troubled by the complexity of the results.

To further clarify how critics in this last category view public opinion, Table 1.1 takes up an example of an issue and discusses how each category of theorist might approach it. The restructuring of the health care system in America, an issue that will come up in subsequent chapters, is a good case for such an exercise.

All students of public opinion need to understand that the opinion expression and measurement process contains many dimensions. These di-

mensions are often evaluated using survey research instruments and give public opinion scholars an understanding of the nature of public opinion on various issues.

First, the direction of public opinion is important. That is, one must determine where people stand on issues. Often, direction is thought of as a simple “pro” or “con” answer for an issue, but more complex patterns are possible as well. For example, an individual may be in favor of a woman’s right to decide whether to have an abortion but may be opposed to abortion after the first trimester of pregnancy or under certain conditions.

Second, the intensity of opinion can be critical. How strongly do people feel about an issue? Where an issue has intense advocates on either side, as the abortion issue does, the result can indicate deep social divisions. If an intense minority confronts a relatively apathetic majority, majority public opinion may be ignored by policymakers seeking to appease the vocal minority.

One of the unresolved problems of democracy is balancing majority and minority opinion. When a minority of people feels strongly on an issue, should its opinion outweigh that of the more apathetic majority? If neither majority nor minority is particularly intense, policymakers may view the public opinion environment as permissive and enact the policies they themselves favor. This situation occurred in the contra aid debate discussed earlier. Alternatively, if an issue draws an intense majority, policymakers may feel compelled to respond to the demands of public opinion.

Third, the stability of public opinion can affect scholars’ and leaders’ evaluation of the issue. Stability refers to the consistency of people’s opinions over time. If public opinion on an issue is stable, leaders may be more likely to pay attention to it. If public opinion on an issue changes frequently, it is more likely to be dismissed. This tendency occurs because stable public opinion is believed to reflect true public desires, whereas unstable public opinion is perceived as capricious and uninformed. However, just because public opinion changes over time does not mean that those changes are not heeded by leaders. Political scientist Michael Corbett points out that “in 1953, 68 percent of Americans favored capital punishment for convicted murderers; then the proportion favoring capital punishment declined until it reached 42 percent in 1966; but then the proportion rose again until it reached 72 percent in 1985.”<sup>17</sup> In this span of time, the death penalty was abolished, then reinstated.

The stability of public opinion can be affected by many things. One factor is intensity, which we have already discussed. But stability is also affected by the informational content of the opinion. Information content is the fourth quality of public opinion that scholars frequently explore. There is much evidence to suggest that people do not know very much about public issues. Some of this evidence you have already seen in Box 1.4, and a more complete discussion appears in Chapter Eight. For now, it may be enough to say that scholars are unsure about exactly how much information the public needs in order to form “rational” opinions about public issues. However, it seems unlikely that uninformed public opinion will have as much impact on political leaders as informed public opinion will.

#### WHICH MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION IS BEST?

Which definition of public opinion is the correct one? That is difficult to say. In contemporary American life, all of the definitions are used, depending upon the circumstances in which the public mood is being discussed. Scholars certainly use all five categories in their work, as do journalists and public officials. Some might argue that because of the popularity of polling, the first category (public opinion as aggregation of individual opinions) is most common, but journalists and our leaders often gain knowledge of public opinion by speaking with interest group leaders. And almost all reporters and policymakers have, either knowingly or unknowingly, manufactured notions of public opinion through their spoken and written rhetoric.

The definition one chooses depends upon several factors, including the following:

1. The type of research one is conducting. For example, if one is exploring the ways that American women of the late nineteenth century viewed suffrage (the right to vote), they might look for evidence of public opinion in the letters of suffragettes or in the documents of women’s rights organizations. This research assumes that public opinion is the product of interaction between individuals and organized interest groups. Since the question is a historical one, a researcher cannot define public opinion as the opinions of an

aggregation of individuals. That would demand a survey, and in this case the respondents died long ago!

2. Historical conditions often dictate the kind of definition of public opinion one uses. We will see in the next chapter, for example, how form of government can influence the ways leaders and citizens think about the public. In a dictatorship, public opinion is often used rhetorically (category 5) to manipulate the populace and make people think that leaders are acting in the interest of the citizenry. In a situation like this, public opinion really is a phantom, manufactured to make people feel as though they are listened to (even if that is not the case).
3. The kind of technology that exists in a particular society at a certain point in time may determine which meaning of public opinion is used. Take opinion polling as an example of technology. These days, computers are used extensively in the interviewing process and in analysis of survey data. Although opinion polling was developed to aggregate individual opinions (category 1), the technology for conducting a scientific poll has become so easy to use that people employ the aggregation approach because they can do surveys so quickly. This is not to say that the availability of technology always determines how we see the political and social world, but it is the case that we are attracted to techniques that enable us to understand the world in what seems an efficient manner.

As students of public opinion and political processes, we must live with ambiguity when it comes to defining public opinion. The fact that we cannot define the term with precision does not mean that the field has no boundaries, as we will see in subsequent chapters. The sorts of intellectual debates, political phenomena, and theories that are described in this book will give you a firm understanding of what the field of public opinion is about—what is included under the general heading of “public opinion studies” and what is not.

#### NOTES

1. See Benjamin I. Page and Jason Tannenbaum, “Populistic Deliberation: The Zoe Baird Uprising,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1995, Chicago.

2. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Unwin, 1948), pp. 27–38.
3. William Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1919).
4. Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
6. Nelson N. Foote and Clyde W. Hart, “Public Opinion and Collective Behavior,” in Muzafir Sherif and Milbourne O. Wilson, eds., *Group Relations at the Crossroads* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1953), pp. 308–331.
7. Herbert Blumer, *Collective Behavior* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1946).
8. Price, *Public Opinion*.
9. Blumer, *Collective Behavior*.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
11. Price, *Public Opinion*, p. 26; quotes from Robert E. Park, *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904), p. 80.
12. Blumer, *Collective Behavior*, p. 189.
13. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
14. Ronald Steele, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New York: Vintage, 1980).
15. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925).
16. Pierre Bourdieu, “Public Opinion Does Not Exist,” in Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelau, eds., *Communication and Class Struggle* (New York: International General, 1979), pp. 124–130.
17. Michael Corbett, *American Public Opinion Trends* (New York: Longman, 1991), p. 24.

## The History of Public Opinion

In the previous chapter, we discussed the various possible routes to understanding and measuring public opinion in the context of contemporary life, but we only made brief reference to the historical development of public opinion. This chapter is devoted to exploring the history of public opinion—the ways that intellectuals, citizens, and leaders have thought about that concept through the ages and the ways that these same individuals communicated and evaluated the popular sentiment.

There are two approaches to investigating the history of public opinion. One can examine the intellectual history of the concept itself in an attempt to follow the theoretical debates about the nature of public opinion. Intellectual history concentrates on how philosophers and theorists have thought about public opinion in different epochs. Alternately, one can pursue study of the sociocultural history of public opinion, paying close attention to the techniques people have used to communicate their opinions and the ways leaders have tried to assess those expressed beliefs. Neither approach is “better.” On the contrary, these two forms of historical analysis complement each other. In this chapter, we explore both sorts of history so that you will understand the philosophical development of public opinion and the “nuts and bolts” of how public opinion has been expressed and measured in different communities at different points in history. We will begin with the intellectual history of the concept of public opinion and then move to social history.

Before we discuss philosophy, however, a few prefatory notes are in order. First, since the history of public opinion—intellectual and social—is so lengthy, we cannot explore all topics, debates, events, or theories in

great depth. We will, however, give you enough of an introduction to the history of public opinion so that you have a skeletal map of this narrative. Second, this chapter focuses on the ways that public opinion has been discussed, expressed, and assessed in the West—primarily in the United States, the United Kingdom, and European nations. This geographical exclusiveness is unfortunate, but contemporary notions of public opinion in America draw most heavily upon Western intellectual traditions. Through the ages, individuals in many South American, African, and Asian cultures have undoubtedly thought about the idea of public opinion, but not much of this thinking has been integrated into American political culture and institutions. Finally, just as different parties in contemporary American politics disagree on the meaning of public opinion, philosophers and citizens in different eras understood the phrase (or similar phrases) differently, depending on the political, technological, and cultural circumstances of the day (see Box 2.1). As a result, it may feel as though the meaning of the term is always shifting. This is exactly the point of the current chapter as well as this entire text: The meaning of public opinion is always in flux, depending upon the context in which the term is used.

#### BOX 2.1 ONE PHILOSOPHER'S VIEW

Jürgen Habermas is one of the most important and prolific philosophers of our time. Fortunately for us, he has focused his immense talents on the history and meaning of public opinion in a variety of books and journal articles. This chapter owes much to Habermas, a German scholar whose work has been enormously influential in almost all academic disciplines—political science, communications, sociology, philosophy, literature, anthropology, and history, among them. Habermas believes that the meaning of public opinion shifts in each era and that this meaning is always tied to the nature of the broader political and social arena that he calls the “public sphere.”

The public sphere is the forum for discussion of politics outside of our homes but also outside of governmental circles. In other words, talk about family matters or discussion of politics within a household is not part of public sphere discourse, nor is talk among congressmen or between the president and his advisers. Public sphere talk is what one hears in a neighborhood bar or on talk radio. One can also find public sphere discussions in the edi-

torial pages of newspapers, both regional and national, or in the large number of American current affairs magazines.

For Habermas, the meaning of public opinion and the ways we express it are always changing because the nature of public life itself is always shifting. In mid-nineteenth-century America, for example, women were typically not part of the public sphere. Middle-class women ruled the *domestic* sphere—caring for children and for their homes—but played only social roles in public (e.g., as hostesses, entertainers, or supporting players to husbands and fathers). Since women were largely absent from the *public sphere* in any serious sense, their voices were not considered part of *public opinion*. As a result, they could not vote and tended not to write letters to editors or vigorously campaign for political candidates. “Public opinion” in mid-nineteenth-century America meant the opinions of certain classes of men.

Habermas summarizes the connection between public opinion and public life in this way: “A concept of public opinion that is historically meaningful, that normatively meets the requirements of the constitution of a social-welfare state [such as our own], and that is theoretically clear and empirically identifiable can be grounded only in the structural transformation of the public sphere itself and in the dimension of its development.”

SOURCES: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), quoted passage at p. 244. An application of Habermas’s ideas to the analysis of women in the nineteenth century is given in Mary Ryan’s *Women in Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

#### WHY DOES HISTORY MATTER?

There are a great many important issues in the study of current public opinion: how Americans feel about U.S. intervention in foreign conflicts, whether we trust our president, differences in opinion among various social groups, among others. Given all the focus on contemporary attitudes, why should we be concerned about past notions of public opinion or the ways people expressed themselves centuries ago?

History matters for two major reasons. First, and most obvious, an understanding of history enables us to understand the present—how it is

things got the way they are. Here is an analogy from social life: Suppose we want to understand a friend's behavior. If we are really interested in getting a full picture of why this friend acts the way she does, we need information about her life experiences—her family background, the region where she grew up, the sorts of schools she attended, and so on. Similarly, if we are to understand the political culture of contemporary America, we need to know about the past: how political parties evolved, how the Constitution has been amended, which social movements changed the practice of politics, and the like. In the narrower area of public opinion, we need to understand how opinions were communicated in the past in order to properly analyze the present. For example, one reason opinion polling became so popular in America is because George Gallup and others were so concerned with the way dictators—like Adolf Hitler—attempted to speak for the people instead of letting them express their own opinions. In the mid-twentieth century, after two bloody world wars and the rise of multiple totalitarian regimes, polling seemed like a very democratic way to communicate public opinion. The rise of surveys was, in part, a reaction to the menace of dictatorship.

Second, history gives us a sense of possibility. In the area of public opinion, we have become accustomed to polls and the statements of interest groups as indicators of public opinion, but history provides examples of the many innovative ways people have expressed themselves in the past. When we recognize, through our historical analyses, just how many options exist for communicating our beliefs, we can become more creative in expressing and evaluating public opinion. For example, later in this chapter we discuss the creative rituals of eighteenth-century Europeans and how those rituals expressed public sentiment about particular institutions. If we think about rituals in general as means for expressing public opinion, we begin to recognize that some of our own twentieth-century rituals are also expressions of public opinion. Rituals like Memorial Day parades or commemorations of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings at the end of World War II enable citizens to express both love of country and critical attitudes toward government.

Let us begin our exploration of the intellectual history of public opinion. Much of the early theorizing of the concept is tied to broader inquiries philosophers have made about governance, representation, political participation, and even human nature. We begin our journey in ancient Greece, the setting for early experiments in democracy.

#### PRE-ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHIES OF PUBLIC OPINION

The particular phrase “public opinion” was not used widely before the nineteenth century, but many of the great political philosophers of the ancient period used similar phrases to speak about the popular sentiment. Plato, a Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C., was very much interested in public opinion. He was respectful of its powers and believed that the public will should be heeded, though he was somewhat skeptical of the common person's wisdom. An early twentieth-century scholar named Ernest Barker has noted that Plato and many of his contemporaries thought that members of the public needed to be educated in order to understand and appreciate their government and the laws they lived under. This view is contrary to the modern one that puts the public first: Public opinion should be the basis of all law, and laws should be altered as the public mood shifts. Barker puts it this way: “The Greeks believed in the need of education to tune and harmonise social opinion to the spirit and tone of a fixed and fundamental sovereign law. The modern belief is in the need of representation to adjust and harmonise a fluid and subordinate law to the movement of a sovereign public opinion or general will.”<sup>1</sup>

Plato generally distrusted the masses: He was not sure that people could realize their own best interests or strive toward the creation of a morally sound state. As a result, he argued that the democratic state should be ruled by philosopher-kings. Above all, Plato valued reason and rationality as paths to the best sort of moral community. The people know what they want as far as immediate comforts (food, love, recreation) go, but they do not have the cognitive capacity to rule themselves in the most just and effective ways possible.

Plato represented an important strand of thought in ancient philosophy, but others writing in the same period disagreed sharply with his negative assessment of the public's capabilities. In particular, Aristotle argued most eloquently for the voice of the public, defending the wisdom of the common citizen. As scholar Robert Minar puts it, Aristotle believed in the power of community: “Aristotelian political theory seems to suggest that public opinion may be regarded as the vehicle of the spirit and continuity of the life of the organic community. It carries the enduring wis-

dom of the social organism and reflects that wisdom on the particular, immediate actions of government.”<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle did not see public opinion as the sentiments people held toward particular issues of the day, although he saw those attitudes as important and worth articulating. Instead, he argued that public opinion is equivalent to the values, norms, and tastes of a civilization. This “climate of opinion,” to borrow a phrase from sociologist Robert Merton, is then funneled through institutions (courts and schools, for example) that serve as moderating influences. In other words, institutions take “raw” opinion from communities, organize it, eliminate irrationalities, and make it coherent. Aristotle was undoubtedly more optimistic about the role and nature of public opinion than were many of his predecessors who advocated for democracy but still did not really trust the people (see Box 2.2).

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**BOX 2.2 ARISTOTLE VERSUS PLATO:  
THE VALUE OF PUBLIC OPINION**

Since Plato and Aristotle wrote about public opinion in the fourth century B.C., thousands of scholars of political theory have debated and reinterpreted their ideas. Even today, because those ancient texts were so immensely thoughtful and complex, a large number of thinkers scrutinize them, looking for cues about how democracy might work. Perhaps the best way to evaluate the argumentation of Plato and Aristotle is to turn to their original statements. These quotes are removed from their original contexts, but they will give you some idea of how these philosophers conceptualized the public will.

In *The Republic*, Plato explicates his famous analogy of “the cave” and writes on a variety of other topics from mathematics to child rearing. He argues that democracy produces a sort of chaos that makes its citizens lose sight of right and wrong, of beauty, and of all that is “good.” Not all men have good character:

In a democracy you must have seen how men condemned to death or exile stay on and go about in public, and no one takes any more notice than he would of a spirit that walked invisible. There is so much tolerance and supe-

riority to petty considerations; such a contempt for all those fine principles we laid down in founding our commonwealth, as when we said that only a very exceptional nature could turn out a good man, if he had not played as a child among things of beauty and given himself only to creditable pursuits. A democracy tramples all such notions under foot; with a magnificent indifference to the sort of life a man has led before he enters politics, it will promote to honour anyone who merely calls himself the people’s friend. . . . These then, and such as these, are the features of democracy, an agreeable form of anarchy with plenty of variety and an equality of a peculiar kind for equals and unequals alike.

Thus, Plato is concerned about the “side effects” of democracy: neglect of social values, lack of enforcement of societal norms, and an undeserved sort of equality. Citizens are far from equal in their intelligence, education, aesthetic sense, or integrity. Democracy, Plato argues, demands more from the public than it is capable of.

In contrast, Aristotle sees wisdom in the ideas and expressions of citizens acting in public. He glories in the diversity and the very inequalities underscored by Plato. He notes in *The Politics*:

It is possible that the many, no one of whom taken singly is a good man, may yet taken all together be better than the few, not individually but collectively, in the same way that a feast to which all contribute is better than one given at one man’s expense. For where there are many people, each has some share of goodness and intelligence, and when these are brought together, they become as it were one multiple man with many pairs of feet and hands and many minds. So too in regard to character and the powers of perception. That is why the general public is a better judge of works of music and poetry; some judge some parts, some others, but their joint pronouncement is a verdict upon the whole. And it is this assembling in one what was before separate that gives the good man his superiority over any individual many from the masses.

Interestingly, the arguments between Plato and Aristotle about the value of public opinion continue today, although in a somewhat different form. One need only think about the arena of foreign affairs, where policymakers won-

der whether the public knows enough to be consulted on complex issues—whether the United States should commit to an international peacekeeping effort or whether it should tie its foreign aid to human rights considerations.

SOURCES: Plato, *The Republic*, ed. and trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), quoted passage at p. 283; Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. and trans. T. A. Sinclair (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), quoted passage at p. 132.

The next set of philosophers to consider public opinion were the Romans, who like Plato were skeptical of the common people and their desires. Cicero, the great statesman and orator, claimed, “*Sic est vulgus: ex veritate pauca, ex opinione multa aestimat*,” which can be translated as “This is the common crowd: Judging few matters according to truth, many according to opinion.” It was not the case that Romans dismissed public opinion completely. They simply believed that public opinion mattered most in the case of leadership. Were statesmen honored by the people? Were they popular? Much discussion of public opinion in Roman times was oriented around this narrow dimension of politics.<sup>3</sup>

Although it seems odd to leap across centuries, no further significant theorizing about public opinion occurred until Niccolò Machiavelli, the Italian statesman and writer, began to write at the start of the sixteenth century (see Figure 2.1). He is best known for his book on political strategy, written as an advisory tract for potential rulers. In *The Prince*, which is undoubtedly one of the most eloquent and persuasive manuals on political maneuvering ever written, Machiavelli illuminates the various dilemmas of the prince, discussing how a prince should act in public (“bear himself”), whether he needs to build fortresses, and whether it is better to be feared or loved by the people. One issue he discusses at great length is the nature of the people and what occupies them:

For of men it may generally be affirmed that they are thankless, fickle, false, studious to avoid danger, greedy of gain, devoted to you while you are able to confer benefits upon them, and ready, as I said before, while danger is distant, to shed their blood, and sacrifice their property, their lives, and their children for you; but in the hour of need they turn against you. . . . Men are so simple, and governed so absolutely by their present needs, that he who wishes to deceive will never fail in finding willing dupes.<sup>4</sup>



FIGURE 2.1  
Niccolò Machiavelli,  
Political Adviser and Author  
of *The Prince*. (Courtesy of  
the Library of Congress)

Here we see how closely early theorizing about public opinion and governance was tied to observations about human nature. Before the twentieth century, it was conventional for philosophers to speculate about the essence of human nature so that they could provide a holistic picture of man as political animal: If one understands the inherent desires of people, their behavior in politics can be explored more fully. Machiavelli believed that humans are so obsessed with their immediate desires and comforts that they cannot rule themselves: They must be governed by a benevolent dictator.

Machiavelli was respectful of public opinion but only because it was a political force that could bring harm to the prince and to the state, not because public opinion has inherent value. He was not an advocate for the wisdom of public opinion as Aristotle had been two millennia earlier. Unlike Aristotle, Machiavelli was not concerned with the harmony of the community or the moral state of the polity. It might seem tangential to bring Machiavelli up at all, since he is not considered a democratic theo-

rist. Yet many of his insights reflect contemporary thoughts about the citizenry that are held by journalists, policymakers, and citizens alike—whether they choose to make negative remarks aloud or not.

Machiavelli is best described as a conflict theorist, one who believes that underlying even the most peaceful society are conflicting values, unfulfilled needs, and animosities. For Machiavelli, there was a fundamental conflict in society between ruler and ruled. These two parties are always suspicious of each other, although the prince always has the upper hand. Machiavelli warns leaders to underscore this fact to the public, yet appear to be acting with kindness and grace in the best interest of the people. To summarize: For Machiavelli, public opinion was volatile, irrational, and potentially explosive. Leaders must be vigilant by keeping a cautious eye on the public, making sure the people hold their statesmen in high regard.

Following Machiavelli in the seventeenth century were Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, two English philosophers who also had a great interest in the relationship between the people and the state. Hobbes, like Machiavelli, also had a negative view of human nature, believing that people live in constant competition as they vie for property, reputation, and personal safety. And it was Hobbes who wrote in his book *The Leviathan* that life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Hobbes’ works are interesting from our perspective because he is an early “contract theorist,” believing that public opinion is crucial to the formation of the state. Machiavelli does not discuss the public’s role in the creation of government because statesmen design society in his philosophical world. Yet for Hobbes, people do participate in politics in that they devise the fundamental rules that establish government. After the state is established, Hobbes sees very little need for political participation by citizens and supports the notion of a benevolent dictator. Yet he does make it clear that the structure of the state is created through a “contract” between the public and its leadership. If the state were to crumble—due to internal or external pressure—it would be the citizenry that again creates a new governmental system.

John Locke, a contemporary of Hobbes, shared his belief in the contract—the agreement among people and leaders about how their community is to be governed. Yet Locke is far more optimistic about human nature and about the possibilities for genuine and regular participation in politics by citizens. His theory of government was so eloquent and democratic that it greatly influenced our own Founding Fathers, who drew upon Lockean political theory in their plans for uniting the American

colonies. Locke spent considerable energy arguing for his theory of inalienable natural rights that should be protected by the state. He was, like many philosophers of his day, somewhat skeptical of popular opinion, though he believed fiercely in the articulation of public opinion as a critical part of politics.

It is strange that the idea of public opinion was valued by Aristotle but not picked up again until Locke wrote in the 1600s. Yet democracy itself, as we understand it, has had a fairly short history, given the length of human existence. Even the ancient Greeks, who are said to have “invented” the idea of democracy, were not quite democrats in the contemporary sense: In ancient Greece, women, foreigners, and slaves had no voice in politics whatsoever.

#### PUBLIC OPINION IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

The eighteenth century was a time of immense change: It is the century of the French and American revolutions, and both were grounded in political philosophy. The most important discussions of democracy and public opinion occurred in Europe, although it is important to note that American statesmen like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin spent considerable time in France and Great Britain, often participating in the great debates about politics of the age. Many contemporary scholars believe that modern American politics really owes a debt to the thinkers of the eighteenth century—particularly the French philosophes. This loose network of French intellectuals produced some of the most original and compelling tracts on public opinion of all time during the eve of the French Revolution. This is a period often referred to as the Enlightenment, since there was so much emphasis on the development of the human mind and spirit through science, the arts, and participation in political discourse.

Perhaps the most important work on public opinion was produced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a brilliant and unruly Enlightenment thinker who challenged a variety of social norms and existing theoretical paradigms. The young Rousseau, who appeared on the Parisian philosophical scene from a rather humble background, developed an elegant theory of the state with public opinion occupying a central role. Again, like philosophers before him, he was somewhat suspicious of the commoner. But more than any thinker to date, Rousseau saw the necessity of placing a fair amount of power in the hands of the public.

Like John Locke, Rousseau was concerned with the rights of individuals. Yet he also placed an enormous value on community and the need for people to respect and listen to each other. The state, Rousseau believed, was based on the general will—what citizens want when they think about the whole of the community. In other words, the general will is our most empathetic set of attitudes, or what we believe is the best course of action to promote the general welfare of the populace. Although Rousseau's discussion of the general will is somewhat complex and even confusing at times, he makes the argument that public opinion is both an aggregation of individual opinions and a more organic force rooted in shared values and attitudes. For Rousseau, then, citizens think about themselves and their needs but are also capable of thinking about the general good of society (see Box 2.3).

#### BOX 2.3 ROUSSEAU ON THE GENERAL WILL

Jean-Jacques Rousseau.  
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

In his book *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau explicated the notion of a “general will,” a broad form of public opinion. He believed, unlike so many philosophers before him, that people were difficult to manipulate. People, Rousseau argued, are basically honest and expect honesty from others—including their leaders. In the following passage he discusses human nature and its relationship to the general will in a chapter entitled “That the General Will Is Indestructible”:

So long as a number of men in combination are considered as a single body, they have but one will, which relates to the common preservation and to the



general well-being. In such a case all the forces of the State are vigorous and simple, and its principles are clear and luminous; it has no confused and conflicting interests; the common good is everywhere plainly manifest and only good sense is required to perceive it. Peace, union, and equality are foes to political subtleties. Upright and simpleminded men are hard to deceive because of their simplicity; allurements and refined pretexts do not impose upon them; they are not even cunning enough to be dupes. When, in the happiest nation in the world, we see troops of peasants regulating the affairs of the State under an oak and always acting wisely, can we refrain from despising the refinements of other nations, who make themselves illustrious and wretched with so much art and mystery?

Perhaps the most difficult line for us to understand is the one about how easy it is to discern the common good. Even with all of our modern techniques for measuring public attitudes, it is still tremendously difficult to state the public interest in any definitive fashion.

SOURCE: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. Lester G. Croker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), quoted passage at p. 109.

We should not leave the era of the French Revolution without mentioning the finance minister to Louis XVI, a man named Jacques Necker, believed by many to have popularized the phrase “public opinion.” Necker recognized that political discourse and the nature of politics had shifted quite dramatically in the eighteenth century. For the first time, a bourgeoisie had emerged to gather and discuss politics through interpersonal dialogue and through the press. At the time, public opinion meant the opinion of the middle classes. Even in a monarchy, Necker recognized just how much of the institutional structure of the state rested on the benevolence of public opinion. He noted that most foreigners “have difficulty in forming a just idea of the authority exercised in France by public opinion; they have difficulty in understanding the nature of an invisible power which, without treasures, without a bodyguard, and without an army gives laws to the city, to the court, and even to the palaces of kings.”<sup>5</sup>

In the nineteenth century, a variety of political philosophers tackled the difficult questions surrounding the nature of public opinion. Among that

group were the English scholars known as the Utilitarians. Jeremy Bentham was the first of the Utilitarians to write extensively about public opinion, and he was most interested in how public opinion acts as a sanction. In other words, he believed that public opinion is a force that keeps society at equilibrium by preventing people from engaging in non-normative behavior. People are afraid of public opinion, so they dare not step outside the bounds of what is “acceptable” to most people. This may seem a dim view of human society, but Bentham and other Utilitarians were most concerned about maximizing happiness among the populace through the maintenance of social harmony. Bentham and John Stuart Mill, another in this British philosophical circle, were believers in democracy but emphasized the importance of majority opinion. In fact, they thought that laws are only needed where the “law of opinion” is not working effectively.

Similar views of public opinion as a force of social control were held by Alexis de Tocqueville, the French observer of nineteenth-century American politics. In his landmark study *Democracy in America*, still cited as one of the most important books in political theory, Tocqueville had this to say about the way that public opinion affects writers and artists:

In America the majority has enclosed throughout within a formidable fence. A writer is free inside that area, but woe to the man who goes beyond it. Not that he stands in fear of an auto-da-fé [burning at the stake, a style of public sentencing from the Inquisition], but he must face all kinds of unpleasantness and everyday persecution. A career in politics is closed to him, for he has offended the only power that holds the keys. He is denied everything, including renown. Before he goes into print, he believes he has supporters; but he feels that he has them no more once he stands revealed to all, for those who condemn him express their views loudly, while those who think as he does, but without his courage, retreat into silence as if ashamed of having told the truth.<sup>6</sup>

It was also in *Democracy in America* that Tocqueville made his famous argument about political equality and its relationship to mass opinion. He noted that in societies where there is much inequality—in an aristocracy, for example—public opinion is not viewed as particularly important. This is because people of impoverished circumstances recognize that others are better educated and more worldly than they are and therefore have more

informed opinions. Yet as citizens achieve greater and greater equality, they see that they are just as capable as their friends, coworkers, and neighbors. In these settings, people become interested in numbers:

The nearer men are to a common level of uniformity, the less they are inclined to believe blindly in any man or any class. But they are readier to trust the mass, and public opinion becomes more and more mistress of the world. . . . In times of equality men, being so like each other, have no confidence in others, but this same likeness leads them to place almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public. For they think it not unreasonable that, all having the same means of knowledge, truth will be found on the side of the majority.<sup>7</sup>

This insight is particularly relevant in an age of mass communication where it is possible for all people to gather large amounts of information about the public affairs upon which they may base their opinions. Although not all Americans are equal in terms of education and income, it is the case that most have televisions and can watch the nightly network news. We have a sense that our opinions are just as valuable as anyone else's, so we have a tendency to value majorities.

It is interesting that while Tocqueville was writing about American politics, Karl Marx was also thinking and writing about political and social life from an entirely different standpoint (see Figure 2.2). In Tocqueville, on the one hand, we see a celebration of some aspects of democracy and deep concerns about others. In Marx, on the other hand, we see a man who was completely dissatisfied with the status quo and believed that democracy (like other forms of government) was subject to corruption by the forces of capitalism. This opinion is still very much alive in academic writing among scholars who note that democracy and capitalism are intricately intertwined but that democratic ideals have been crushed by consumer culture. The argument is complex, but simple examples of this conflation between democracy and capitalism abound. Neo-Marxists of the contemporary period cite examples of how Americans (and citizens of still-new Eastern European democracies) tend to think of freedom as consumer choice—the right to choose among a variety of products and lifestyles. Yet when it comes to serious engagement in freedom of speech—public debate about controversial issues—citizens



among our other institutions (Congress, the courts) as a molder of public opinion. He noted in 1891, during an age when newspapers were far more obviously partisan than they are today: "It is chiefly in its . . . capacity as an index and mirror of public opinion that the press is looked to. This is the function it chiefly aims at discharging; and public men feel that in showing deference to it they are propitiating, and inviting the commands of, public opinion itself. In worshipping the deity you learn to conciliate the priest."<sup>9</sup>

For Bryce, newspapers both reflect and direct public opinion, so the place of this medium in the political process is crucial. Bryce's work has a contemporary ring to it, and his belief in the importance of media is now commonplace. The fact that journalists now value objectivity as a goal far more than they did in the late nineteenth century means that the role of newspapers as advocates has changed slightly, but they are still powerful movers of public opinion. Newspapers endorse candidates at election time and, more important, value investigative reporting that can greatly change the course of public policy.<sup>10</sup>

Bryce also recognized that the American newspaper contained multiple forms of public opinion, not only news stories and editorials but letters from citizens as well. Letters to the editor had long been overlooked by theorists as a source of public opinion data, but Bryce underscored their role in the communication of popular sentiment. Near the end of his discussion of newspapers, however, Bryce makes it clear that no one—politicians included—can depend entirely on newspapers to gain a comprehensive view of public opinion. As he noted:

Every prudent man keeps a circle of [four or five discerning friends of different types of thought] . . . by whom he can test and correct his own impressions better than by the almost official utterances of the party journals [newspapers]. So in America there is much to be learnt—even a stranger can perceive it—from conversation with judicious observers outside politics and typical representatives of political sections and social classes, which the most diligent study of the press will not give.<sup>11</sup>

One theorist of public affairs who had even more to say on the relationship between newspapers and interpersonal discussion was a French sociologist named Gabriel Tarde, who wrote about public opinion in the

early decades of the twentieth century. He noted in his essay "Opinion and Conversation" that "conversation at all times, and the press, which at present is the principal source of conversation, are the major factors in opinion."<sup>12</sup> In fact, Tarde presented a unidirectional model of opinion formation that can be depicted graphically (see Box 2.4).

#### BOX 2.4 GABRIEL TARDE'S MODEL OF PUBLIC OPINION

Media → Conversation → Opinion → Action

This is one model to use when thinking about the relationship of newspapers to political action. Gabriel Tarde firmly believed that newspapers are a national springboard for political discussion. Conversation about politics, in turn, enables people to clarify their opinions about various political and social policies so that they can act accordingly by voting, volunteering for a campaign, attending a demonstration, and the like.

One might take issue with both the order of elements in this illustration and the linear nature of the model. For example, is it possible that conversation and discussion cause journalists to write particular articles? If that is the case, we need to put some sort of conversational variable in this equation *before* the element "media." And in terms of directionality, we might question whether exposure to the media commonly leads to political action. Some researchers have argued that media are more likely to debilitate or dissuade us from political action than they are to prompt us toward political participation.<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTE

1. There is growing interest in Tarde, thanks in large part to Elihu Katz. See Elihu Katz, "Press-Conversation-Opinion-Action: Gabriel Tarde's Public Sphere," Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, 1997. On the question of whether media dissuade or encourage political activity, the classic discussion can be found in Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton's "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action," in Lyman Bryson, ed., *The Communication of Ideas* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948). The diagram above is Katz's interpretation of Tarde.

After Tarde wrote, a variety of other political theorists tackled the fundamental questions about public opinion—what its meaning is, how it

operates, and what its relationship to political institutions and culture is. And more recent twentieth-century discussions of public opinion, particularly those based on empirical research, are covered in some of the other chapters to come. Yet it might be instructive to end this particular section on public opinion theory with discussion of an important (although largely overlooked) scholarly event that took place in 1924.

As you can see from the vast historical territory covered in this chapter, by the early twentieth century a wide range of intellectuals had focused on the nature of public opinion. In fact, there were so many diverse perspectives on the nature and content of public opinion that political scientists became overwhelmed by the larger philosophical issues. Therefore, in 1924, a group of prominent scholars met at their yearly convention to conduct a roundtable discussion on the measurement of public opinion. After much argument, the researcher who wrote up the results of the roundtable noted:

After some discussion of these points [about the nature of public opinion], it was agreed that an exact definition of public opinion might not be needed until after the technical problem of measuring the opinions of the individual members of the public had been disposed of. It was decided therefore that the round table might well proceed to consider the problem of measuring opinion, especially that related to political matters, *and avoid the use of the term public opinion if possible.* (our emphasis)<sup>13</sup>

In this book, we take just the opposite approach to understanding public opinion: By bringing together the most fundamental insights about public opinion from our greatest philosophers and illuminating the complexity of the topic, we hope to underscore that public opinion is a contested concept but still a rich and valuable one. Students need not avoid the term “public opinion” but instead can use it as a gateway for understanding the challenges of democratic theory and practice.

#### THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF PUBLIC OPINION: EXPRESSION AND MEASUREMENT

Intellectual histories of public opinion such as the brief one provided here are crucial if you are to understand the philosophical development of the concept in political theory. Yet the social history of public opinion—how

popular sentiment has been communicated and measured over time—is equally important and interesting. When we explore how public opinion has been expressed and assessed in previous eras, we gain much insight into the advantages and disadvantages of our own techniques for communicating popular attitudes.

In this section, we often refer to methods of public opinion communication as technologies of public opinion. By this, we mean that citizens and leaders alike use a variety of tools to both express opinions and evaluate them. In contemporary American politics, the public opinion poll or survey is one of the premier technologies for opinion expression and measurement. And one could argue that the newspaper is still an important organ for the communication of popular sentiment, just as it was during the years when Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Bryce traveled America in hopes of understanding the nature of democracy.

Interestingly, the tools that we use to express public opinion can also be considered tools for measuring public opinion. Let us take demonstrations as an example. When thousands of people gather in Washington, D.C., to protest a government policy or to demonstrate that a large number of Americans share a particular cause, identity, or political agenda, the marchers are expressing their opinions. At the same time, however, others are measuring those opinions. Journalists and policymakers alike can assess the size of the crowd as well as the rhetoric of the speeches and the intensity of feeling among rally attendants. Thus, the political demonstration, as a technology of public opinion, enables both the expression and the evaluation of public feeling.

Here we discuss some of the more important technologies that humans throughout the centuries have employed to communicate their attitudes about public affairs. Before we take up this list of techniques, however, it might be instructive to underscore the grand trends in technological innovation over time. There are three forces that have altered the nature of public opinion technologies through the ages:

1. An increasing emphasis on order and routinization.
2. Movement toward private and anonymous means for communication opinion.
3. A shift from local to national and even global opinion expression and assessment.

We shall see as we advance through periods in the history of public expression that our techniques for communicating attitudes have become increasingly standardized and routinized. In other words, we have developed more rigorous schemes for quantifying and aggregating public opinion so that it can be more easily understood. Furthermore, in capitalist societies, public opinion data are a valuable commodity, so it is important to develop standard methods of opinion measurement that are valued by consumers, be they citizens, legislators, or newspapers. Random sampling techniques that enable a researcher to poll a small number of citizens and then generalize to all Americans are a relatively new set of tools developed in the mid-twentieth century. The representative public opinion poll uses a much more standardized methodology than other technologies (such as counting the crowd members at a demonstration). This is not to say that opinion polls are somehow better than other nonquantitative techniques of the past or present. All methods of communicating public opinion have their positive and negative aspects, as we shall see during this discussion.

That opinion expression has become increasingly private is closely connected with the development of two opinion technologies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These periods saw the emergence of secret balloting during elections and the rise of the straw poll (which evolved into the sample survey of today). Before the widespread diffusion of the secret ballot and the confidential poll—methods where one's identity remains anonymous—technologies of public opinion demanded that citizens either sign their name or show their faces: One had to sign a petition, for example, or appear at a political demonstration. There is no protection of a citizen's identity in these cases.<sup>14</sup>

Another important trend in the history of techniques people have used to express and measure public opinion is the increasing emphasis on national—as opposed to local—opinion. The scholar to write most eloquently about this shift is historian Charles Tilly, who argues that expressions of opinion were largely local before the mid-nineteenth century. He notes:

Broadly speaking, the repertoire [of opinion techniques] of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries held to a *parochial* scope: It addressed local

actors or the local representatives of national actors. It also relied heavily on *patronage*—appealing to immediately available power holders to convey grievances or settle disputes. . . . The repertoire that crystallized in the nineteenth century and prevails today is, in general, more *national* in scope: Although available for local issues and enemies, it lends itself easily to coordination among many localities. As compared with the older repertoire, its actions are relatively *autonomous*: instead of staying in the shadow of existing power holders and adapting routines sanctioned by those power holders, users of the new repertoire tend to initiate their own statements of grievances and demands. Strikes, demonstrations, electoral rallies, and similar actions build, in general, on much more deliberately constructed organization than used to be the case. (emphasis in original)<sup>15</sup>

This shift from local expression of opinion to national expression of opinion was made possible, in part, by the development of mass media—the newspaper in particular. Yet other factors played a role as well: the accelerated importance of the nation-state as global actor, improvements in transportation infrastructure (roads, trains, and so on), and the expansion of the size of the federal government.

#### PRE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY OPINION COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

The number and variety of methods people have used to communicate and assess public opinion over time are extraordinarily large. Here we discuss some of the major techniques, those that scholars of public opinion history have focused on most closely. It is best to divide up the technologies into two periods, those used before the nineteenth century and those employed beginning in the early 1800s. The reason is that the nineteenth century is something of a turning point in the history of public opinion: Before the nineteenth century, technologies were less systematic, more public, and more local. After 1800, strategies for communicating public opinion became far more routinized, tended to focus on private expression of opinion, and were much more national in scope.

One of the earliest techniques for opinion communication was rhetoric, the art of public speaking and persuasion. Oratory and

rhetoric were employed by a variety of citizens and leaders of the ancient Greek city-states of the fifth century B.C. in order to argue for policy in those young democracies. As Wilhelm Bauer, the great German historian of public opinion, put it, citizens assembled in the marketplaces of ancient Greece, where “oratory rapidly developed as the technique best suited to the manipulation of public opinion and continued throughout later Greek and Roman times as the most powerful instrument of political propaganda and agitation.”<sup>16</sup> Obviously, rhetoric is still used extensively today, as presidents, members of Congress, interest group leaders, and ordinary citizens try to persuade each other about policy in a variety of areas—in health care, labor relations, education, and economics, among others. The ancient Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Plato included, spent an enormous amount of time thinking about the art of oratory, since democracy revolves around political communication and the expression of ideas and values. Citizens of ancient Greece and Rome were sophisticated consumers of oratory, as so many scholars have noted. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a contemporary scholar of rhetoric, writes:

Ancient oratory was considered a fine art, an art regarded by its cultivators, and by the public, as analogous to sculpture, to poetry, to painting, to music and to acting. This character is common to Greek and Roman oratory. So, for example, Isocrates [a Greek orator] notes that listeners broke into loud applause when antitheses, symmetrical clauses, or other striking rhetorical figures were skillfully presented. . . . When the world of entertainment, persuasion and politics was in the main an oral one, listeners were drawn together in large numbers to experience a piece of communication.<sup>17</sup>

In ancient times, rhetoric occurred in unmediated forums. Speakers addressed crowds in arenas and marketplaces, at festivals and public meetings of all sorts. Such direct address still occurs today, as when legislators speak from the floor or when political candidates give speeches to gathered supporters. Yet these days, much of the public speaking in political life is mediated by television, and that technology has changed the nature of rhetoric itself (see Box 2.5).

#### BOX 2.5 EFFEMINATE VERSUS MANLY RHETORIC



Margaret Thatcher. (Photo courtesy of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, © Terence Donovan)

In her book on the history of speechmaking, Kathleen Hall Jamieson includes a section on the problematics of women's speech. She notes first that “womanly discourse” has traditionally been described as “shrill” and without merit:

For centuries, their opponents argued that women's fundamental irrationality and congenital emotionalism should disqualify them from public

speaking and public office. The high pitch of the woman's voice was seen as symptomatic not of physiological differences in the vocal mechanism but of excessive emotionalism. . . . Noting that shrillness characterized the voices of eunuchs, women, and invalids, [the Roman rhetorician] Quintilian recommended that men increase the robustness of their voices by abstaining from sexual intercourse. Later theorists were equally concerned that men not sound womanish. “Some have a womanish squeaking Tone,” wrote John Mason in *An Essay on Elocution and Pronunciation* (1748), “which, Persons whose Voices are shrill and weak, and overtrained, are very apt to fall into.” . . . Eager to mute the inference that their voices signaled irrational or emotional natures, female politicians, Margaret Thatcher [former prime minister of Great Britain] among them, have sought voice retraining. Under the supervision of a tutor from the National Theatre, Mrs. Thatcher lowered the natural pitch at which she spoke in public.

Yet Jamieson also points out that the “feminine” rhetorical style so thoroughly disdained throughout history can be very effective in the age of tele-

vision. She argues that President Ronald Reagan's success (he was often called "the great communicator" in the press) was due in part to his employment of a traditionally female rhetorical style—one based on self-disclosure and emotional display. About oratory over the airwaves, Jamieson writes:

Television invites a personal, self-disclosing style that draws public discourse out of a private self and comfortably reduces the complex world to dramatic narratives. Because it encompasses these characteristics, the once spurned womanly style is now the style of preference. The same characteristics comprise a mode of discourse well suited to television and much needed in times of social stress or in the aftermath of divisive events. By revivifying social values and ennobling the shared past, epideictic or ceremonial discourse helps sustain the state.

SOURCE: Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), quoted passages from pp. 78–79, 84.

Rhetoric is by far the oldest of all public opinion communication technologies, and there is quite a large gap in the history of public opinion between the development of the art of public speaking and the next major technique: the invention of the printing press (see Figure 2.3). Introduced in the sixteenth century, the printing press enabled the formation of modern publics. In other words, the publication of newspapers, books, and pamphlets made it possible for large numbers of dispersed people to communicate with each other. Before printing, one could communicate only with neighbors and those one met during travel (which was uncommon among ordinary citizens). With the introduction of printed materials about public affairs, however, people could ally themselves with causes, ideas, and organizations. The invention of printing was revolutionary in many respects, but its importance to public opinion expression cannot be overestimated. Thomas Jefferson once said about newspapers in a letter to a friend, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."<sup>18</sup> Tocqueville

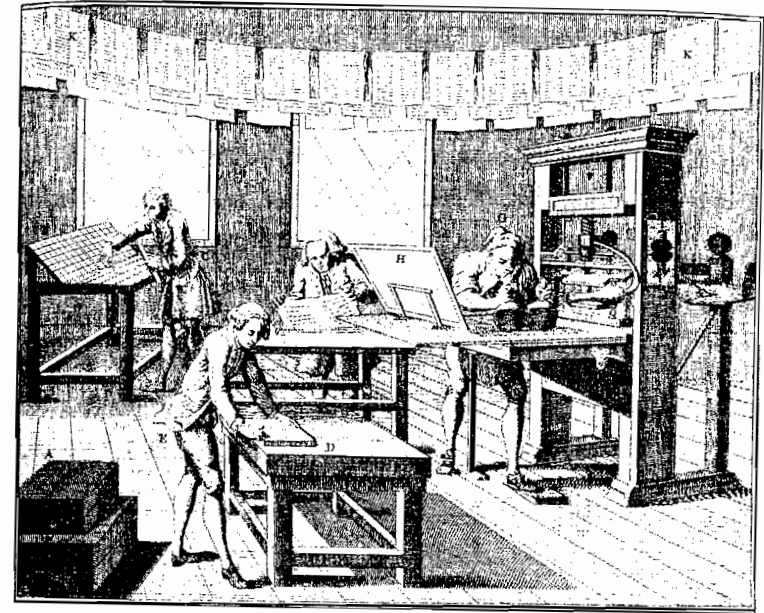


FIGURE 2.3 "A True Representation of a Printing House with the Men at Work." The printing press enabled the development of modern "publics"—geographically dispersed people who shared the same interests or points of view. Depicted in this engraving is a 1752 printing house. SOURCE: John M. Lewis, *Anatomy of Printing: The Influences of Art and History on Its Design* (New York: Watson Guptill Publications, 1970).

and Bryce noted the importance of newspapers in nineteenth-century America, but their influence began much earlier in the European monarchies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Printing made possible the mass distribution of knowledge itself. Common citizens, especially those in rural areas, could get access to ideas about politics, religion, and the arts. And the fact that so many inexpensive pamphlets, newspapers, and books were in circulation boosted the literacy rates in European nations. The explosion of printed materials was not accompanied by freedom of the press, of course, since monarchs could and did shut down newspapers when such publications threatened their rule. Indeed, there are multiple historical cases of printers being tortured and executed for publishing newspapers that criticized the state.



FIGURE 2.4 Lloyd's Coffeehouse in London, 1798. Coffeehouses and taverns served as forums for political debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such sites exist today, although during this earlier period people went to coffeehouses for the express purpose of learning about—and talking about—public affairs. SOURCE: Heinrich Eduard Jacob, *Coffee: The Epic of a Commodity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1935).

Interestingly, printing enabled the mobilization of groups for political causes, the suppression of others, and served as a catalyst for the development of other public opinion communication techniques. The newspapers themselves carried opinions and letters to the editor, but they also served as a starting point for discussion among citizens. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, newspapers and books were vital to the evolution of two important opinion technologies: the coffeehouse and the salon.

Coffeehouses were popular places in England during the centuries following the introduction of printing (see Figure 2.4). Admission to these forums was cheap, and one could spend hours in coffeehouses reading newspapers and political tracts and arguing about ideas with other patrons. Eighteenth-century descriptions of coffeehouses noted that the mix of individuals in attendance varied greatly, with judges, journalists, and lawyers sharing tables with tradesmen, workers, and even the occasional

thief or pickpocket. Perhaps the sociologist Lewis Coser best describes the importance of the coffeehouses as a technology of public opinion:

A common opinion cannot be developed before people have an occasion to discuss with one another, before they have been drawn from the isolation of lonely thought into a public world in which individual opinion can be sharpened and tested in discussion with others. The coffeehouse helped to crystallize a common opinion from a multitude of individual opinions and to give it form and stability. What the newspaper had not yet been able to accomplish was achieved to a large degree by the coffeehouse.<sup>19</sup>

During the period in which coffeehouses were established, another forum for discussion and debate about public affairs became popular in France. Salons—gatherings of intellectuals, statesmen, and artists—were extraordinarily important to the development of political discourse in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. Salons were in many ways less “democratic” than coffeehouses, which were open to all for a small entrance fee. The salons were run with an iron hand by bourgeois women who decided who should be invited and what topics should be discussed. Much has been written about the exclusivity of the salons, but the effects of the conversations within these gatherings were tremendous. It was in the salons of ancien régime Paris that Rousseau developed the ideas for his *Social Contract*, an essay often cited as laying the philosophical groundwork for the French Revolution. Many writers and artists fine-tuned their ideas in the salons before they wrote books for mass distribution. But salons, like all public opinion technologies, were also technologies for public opinion measurement. There is substantial evidence that kings and their courtiers visited the salons on a regular basis in order to gather “data” about public opinion. These data reflected only a small, elite sampling of French opinion, yet since the ideas generated in salons were destined for diffusion throughout France and the world, such information was extraordinarily valuable to those interested in public opinion.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps this is a good moment to reflect on one of the troubling issues in the field of public opinion raised in Chapter One: Who is a member of the public is always shifting, depending upon historical context and the agendas of those measuring public opinion. In terms of developing economic policy in the eighteenth century, for example, it was not as impor-

tant to the king of France to gather public opinion from the French countryside as it was to monitor the way influential bankers and businessmen talked in the salons. This may seem to be a very elitist way of thinking about the public and public opinion (i.e., public opinion is the discourse of rather exclusive salon meetings), yet it is the most accurate meaning of public opinion for that particular period. We mentioned in Chapter One that the meaning of public opinion is contested in contemporary American politics, and the same was true in Europe and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some believed public opinion to be the exclusive banter of the salons, whereas others argued that the discourse of the more egalitarian coffeehouse was more representative and therefore more meaningful as an indicator of public opinion.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also witnessed the evolution of other interesting techniques for communication of public opinion. Two closely related ones are the petition and the public rally. Beginning as early as 1640, citizens of England petitioned Parliament about a number of public affairs, from taxes and monopolies to social issues and peace. Petitions were a very effective means of focusing legislators' attentions on topics of importance to common folk. Petitions were presented peaceably at times, but very often an angry mob delivered its petition to Parliament in person. In a colorful description of violent petitioning during the first English civil war (1642–1646), a British writer noted how women—who were often the leaders in petitioning for peace—presented their demands. The women, he said,

kepte knockinge and beatinge of the outwarde dore before the parliament house, and would have violently forced the same open, and required Mr Pym, Mr Strode, and some other members . . . and threatened to take the rounde heades of the parliament whome they saide they would caste into the Thames [River].. . . These women were not any whit scared or ashamed of their incivilities, but cryed out so much the more, even at the doore of the house of Commons, Give us these Traytors that are against peace, that we may teare them in peeces, Give us Pym.<sup>21</sup>

Not all petitioners were angry mobs, but so much violence accompanied the presentation of petitions to Parliament that in 1648, legislators passed a bill against unruly petitioning. This was ineffective, so Parliament then

limited the number of people who could present a petition to twenty. Even this did not deter violence in conjunction with petitioning, so in 1699, all petitioners were required to give their petition to their representative in advance of parliamentary debate so that he could present it for them.

This series of incidents in British history could be interpreted in several ways. One might argue that the petitioners were too unruly to engage in the sort of rational political dialogue necessary for the construction of public policy. Alternately, we can read this as an attempt by Parliament to squash the intensity of public opinion by erasing the emotion underpinning the demands of petitions. Historians' interpretations of these events, as well as other acts of citizens during the English civil wars, are interesting and varied.<sup>22</sup>

Why add rioting and demonstrations to our list of opinion technologies, since the process of people gathering together to express their desires might be seen as a fundamental human activity? Although crowds gathered in the ancient city-states of Greece and throughout the ages, rioting escalated as a form of public opinion expression in seventeenth-century England. Most of these “popular disturbances” (as they were called at the time) centered on economics: Rioters protested fiscal policies of the Parliament as well as the food shortages and food price hikes resulting from those policies. In a 1938 book, British scholar Max Beloff reports on his archival research concerning the food riots of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In late-twentieth-century America, we are not accustomed to food rioting, but such demonstrations were common during this period. Beloff writes of 1708:

The steepness of the rise in [grain] prices was indeed sharper in these years than at any other time in the period under discussion. . . . The populace was not slow to react. In May of 1709 it was reported from Essex that mobs of women amounting to hundreds were on the move and had threatened to ‘fire divers houses, and shoot several persons, by reason they have been dealers in corn to London, on pretense they make the same dear.’<sup>23</sup>

Rioting is one of the most obviously public of public opinion technologies: Although one can often get “lost in a crowd,” those involved in riots expect to be recognized and heard. In contemporary American politics, we often witness demonstrations, strikes, and marches. Yet the in-

tensity of these gatherings pales in comparison to the series of violent protests over government economic policy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.

The next important opinion technology worthy of mention in this brief historical overview is the general election. There is evidence that elections were used in the early Greek democracies, although participation was limited only to male citizens, so they are not considered “general” in any contemporary sense.

Elections are interesting from the standpoint of public opinion history because they represent a turning point in public expression itself. Until the emergence of the secret ballot—generally used in democratic elections—opinion expression was public and attributed. One could not cast a vote anonymously and therefore had to take a certain amount of responsibility in one’s local community for holding a particular opinion. With the diffusion of the general election, the anonymous communication of beliefs became possible on a large scale. Although not all were allowed to vote (e.g., slaves and women), general elections for the presidency in America began in the early nineteenth century. It is not surprising that straw polling emerged shortly thereafter.

Straw polling is “nonscientific” polling conducted with pen and paper, over the telephone, or by less formal means (e.g., a “show of hands”). In the early nineteenth century, journalists, party operatives, and citizens would poll people in their communities about upcoming elections. Major newspapers, like the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, would publish polls from their reporters who were often traveling around the country covering political rallies and speeches. Many journalists conducted straw polls on long train or boat rides in order to get a sense of public opinion in the local community. Although straw polls are still conducted today (e.g., “call-in polls” on radio or television stations), most serious polling after 1936 utilized the sample survey or scientific poll.

Were these straw polls accurate? Probably not, but it is difficult to tell from our vantage point in the early twenty-first century. Claude Robinson, a professor at Columbia University, conducted an analysis of straw polling in 1932 and found much variance. Straw polls conducted in person tended to be more accurate than the sort that asked readers to cut a ballot from the newspaper and mail it back. Yet even the in-person interview did not always yield accurate forecasts of upcoming elections.<sup>24</sup>

**For Bryan and the County Jail,  
To the Editor of THE New-York Times**

**On a south-bound train on the Delaware and Hudson Railroad last Thursday, in one car an enthusiastic drummer took the now popular straw vote to determine the political affiliations of the passengers. The poll showed the 28 occupants divided—18 for McKinley, 5 for Bryan. This was satisfactory, but more was to come. When the train halted at Ballston, among those who got off were the five Bryan sympathizers, and then it was seen that they were handcuffed together, and were a gang of prisoners on their way to the county jail at that place.**

**SOUND MONEY.**

**HALLSTON, N. Y., Oct. 8.**

FIGURE 2.5 In the nineteenth century, citizens would often poll their friends, neighbors, and coworkers about upcoming presidential races. Often, businessmen who were traveling around their own region would poll strangers in train cars and on steamers. This humorous poll, sent to the *New York Times* in 1896 during the contest between McKinley and Bryan, comes from a McKinley supporter who watched one of his fellow passengers poll the riders on a New York train.

We believe that the accuracy of these straw polls is the least interesting aspect of the phenomenon. Straw polls were important in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because they were a vehicle for getting citizens involved in politics. First, straw polls made elections seem like “horse races.” On the surface this may sound like a negative assessment, but it can be argued that news articles emphasizing the contest—who is ahead and who trails—get voters excited about an upcoming election. Second, people often conducted their own straw polls (see Figure 2.5) instead of waiting for journalists to poll them or their neighbors. This is another way that straw voting, as a formal political endeavor, increased citizen involvement. Finally, there is historical evidence that straw polling

was accompanied by political discussion: When people were polled, it usually followed or preceded a debate about the issues and the campaign. Thus, straw polling prompted people to engage their neighbors and coworkers in discussions of public affairs. Do today's scientific polls serve the same function of inspiring public discourse? It is a difficult question to answer but an important one for students of public opinion to ponder.

Opinion polling was so popular and useful throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that marketing researchers, political analysts, academics, and statisticians all worked intensely on developing a more accurate and rigorous way of assessing public opinion. In 1936, a year when a popular magazine called the *Literary Digest* mistakenly predicted that Alf Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt in the presidential election, a young man named George Gallup predicted just the opposite. Gallup, using a mathematical approach called random sampling, did not determine the election outcome perfectly (he was off by 7 percentage points), but his method was far better than the *Digest's* or any other straw poll (see Box 2.6).

#### BOX 2.6 GEORGE GALLUP ON POLLING IN A DEMOCRACY

George Gallup, an early pollster who did much to popularize the opinion survey. (Photo courtesy of the Gallup Organization)

George Gallup's success as a pollster was primarily due to his early use of random sampling. His pioneering methodological spirit was only part of the reason for his success: He had an almost religious belief that polling could strengthen democracy in America and beyond. In 1940, he and Saul Rae wrote:



The kind of public opinion implied in the democratic ideal is tangible and dynamic. It springs from many sources deep in the day-to-day experience of individuals who constitute the political public, and who formulate these opinions as working guides for their political representatives. This public opinion listens to many propagandas, most of them contradictory. It tries in the clash and conflict of argument and debate to separate the true from the false. It needs criticism for its very existence, and through criticism it is constantly being modified and molded. It acts and learns by action. Its truths are relative and contingent upon the results which its action achieves. Its chief faith is a faith in experiment. It believes in the value of every individual's contribution to political life, and in the right of ordinary human beings to have a voice in deciding their fate. Public opinion, in this sense, is the pulse of democracy.

SOURCE: George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How It Works* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), quoted passage at p. 8.

The key to Gallup's success was sampling theory, which dictates that one use methods of random selection to choose respondents for a poll. If one carefully chooses members of a sample using this method and response rates are reasonably high, the sample should "simulate" the opinions of the population at large. The *Literary Digest* did not use sampling methods; it simply relied upon various lists of citizens (gathered from phone directories and auto registration records) and sent out millions of ballots, asking citizens to mark their preference for the upcoming election. From 1916 through 1936, the *Digest* used this method. After Gallup embarrassed the *Digest* by predicting the election more accurately than it had, the *Digest* issued a public apology and eventually shut down operations.

Our history of public opinion stops here because the introduction of representative sampling was the last revolutionary change in how we think about and measure public opinion. Petitions, rioting, and demonstrations are still influential means of expressing and assessing public opinion, but scientific polling is now the preeminent tool for communicating opinion. Since Gallup's earliest polls, a variety of technical improvements in the collection and analysis of survey data have made pre-

election polling much more accurate. Polling on issues—how people feel about health care reform, foreign policy, and other current affairs—is still extraordinarily difficult and complicated. Sampling and survey design will be addressed in Chapter Three, where you will be introduced to that method as well as to several other methods of assessing public opinion.

The story of public opinion is a long one, beginning with the ancient Greek philosophers who thought and wrote so much about popular sentiments and the meaning of those sentiments in a democracy. Some periods have seen more interest in public opinion than others owing to the predominance of certain forms of government: In autocratic regimes, public opinion is important only in that it must be tamed or controlled, whereas in democratic states, the nature of public opinion (in theory) determines the direction of public policy. In every era, new democracies emerge—the most recent set appearing in Eastern Europe—and the same enduring questions about public opinion arise: Who composes the public? And how might we know its desires? As we saw in Chapter One, these questions are difficult to answer. Yet no democratic state can evolve if its leaders and citizens fail to grapple with such monumental theoretical and practical issues.

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