Introduction

Rethinking public opinion in late nineteenth-century Britain

'There is no word that has played so important and conspicuous a role in the politics of recent times, as Public Opinion. None more often occurs, and there is none on which cases of difficulty more often turn, than this. The word, if not the thing it expresses, is new; and the thing, if not new, is new in the importance it plays.'[1]

'Such a disquisition, if it is to accomplish anything, must be prefaced by some analysis of public opinion itself. A multitude of persons, who employ the phrase continuously and often rightly, would nevertheless be puzzled to define it.'[2]

Writing at the middle and end of the nineteenth century respectively, Joseph Moseley and Frank Taylor noted the pervasiveness of the language of 'public opinion' in the political discourse of their times. They were right to do so. Few terms occupied such a central and enduring place in the political life of late nineteenth-century Britain. Dispute over the boundaries of the public recurred throughout a period which witnessed significant growth in the electorate. Debate over the character and quality of 'public opinion', about its reasonableness and vigilance, was equally persistent. In an era prior to opinion polling, the location of 'public opinion' gave rise to considerable discussion. This book recovers and reconstructs these debates.

The language of 'public opinion' in the second half of the nineteenth century has received less attention from historians than might be expected, and less than has been devoted to the debates of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is surprising for two main reasons: the importance of the idea of 'public opinion' in

[1] J. Moseley, *Political Elements, or The Progress of Modern Legislation* (London, 1852), p. 119.
[2] F. Taylor, *The Newspaper Press as a Power Both in the Expression and Formation of Public Opinion* (London, 1898), p. 4.

contemporary political argument and the relevance of its history to both established and recent historiographical concerns.

Newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets and books all reflect the ubiquity of 'public opinion' in the political discourse of late nineteenth-century Britons.[3] Historians of the late eighteenth century have highlighted the rise of 'society' as a category of thought, and the rapid growth of interest in the relationship between social change and political arrangements. In the second half of the nineteenth century, these debates gained urgency from the conjuncture of sustained economic growth, urbanisation and technological change, particularly in communications, with the growing accessibility of and participation in the political system. 'Public opinion' was the principal term through which the link between the social and the political was interrogated, charted and contested. The widespread conviction that the public was growing in scope and power raised significant issues about the kind of polity that was emerging, and should emerge, in Britain. These concerns were most obviously apparent in debates about the franchise – debates addressed by generations of historians, but which have been recently restored to historiographical prominence in work on the second and third reform acts.[4] However, discussion over the relationship between the social and the political extended far beyond the question of the suffrage. Within developing understandings of the constitution, 'public opinion' was *both* an essential element of the political system and an expression of social forces. Recent work on the language of 'civil society' has suggested that British usage was more closely tied to the institutions of the polity than the now more familiar continental notion of 'civil society' as a space between the private realm and the state.[5] Scrutiny of the language of 'public opinion' in the second half of the nineteenth century suggests, however, that the continued

[3] Simple searching of digitised newspaper sources confirms the frequency of reference to 'public opinion' in the period. In *The Times* alone, search engines suggest 27 153 hits from 1870 to 1914. Compare this with 78 for 'mass opinion' and 1124 for 'popular opinion'.

[4] C. Hall, K. McClelland & J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000). On 1884–5, M. Roberts, 'Electoral independence and popular politics in later Victorian Britain' (NACBS, 2006) and M. Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832–1914* (Basingstoke, 2009).

[5] J. Harris ed., *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford, 2003), p. 5.

resonance of the political as a mode of understanding was compatible with an acknowledgement of the impact of economic and social change.

Traditional narratives of this period portray it as a process of democratisation that culminates in the establishment of universal male suffrage in 1918 and the inauguration of genuine universal suffrage in 1928. Of course, before 1918, Britain looked, in comparative perspective or relative to Dahlian conceptions of polyarchal democracy, relatively undemocratic.[6] That said, the virtues, and perhaps more especially the vices, of 'democracy' were certainly much aired in these years. There were certainly those who took Britain to be, or to be becoming, a democracy, but such views were not universally held.[7] Both the second and third reform acts led some to discern the advent of democracy; but, as late as 1914, others emphasised the limitations on participation within the British polity. Contemporaries differed not only in their assessments of Britain *qua* democracy, but also in their understandings of 'democracy' itself. As the reform debates of 1884–5 testify, democracy might be taken as synonymous with direct rule, or equated with rule by the poor, or the many. Importantly, 'democracy' was equally likely to be taken to refer to a social group as to a political system, and contemporaries moved easily between these meanings.[8] Many continued to regard the democratic as but one element within the polity. As with the language of 'public opinion', contemporary usage meshed the social and the political in ways that sit uneasily with their separation in much historiography. In seeking to analyse their changed political world, contemporaries, as in 1884–5, often emphasised the growing capacity of public opinion to mould the developments of formal politics.[9] Debate over the formation and character of 'public opinion' was a primary means by which commentators evaluated the location of political power under the broader franchise of the late nineteenth century.

[6] R. A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (Yale, 1998).
[7] This issue is further discussed in J. Thompson, 'Modern liberty redefined' in G. Stedman Jones & G. Claeys, eds., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 720–47.
[8] See, for instance, the Earl of Carnarvon on the varied meanings of democracy, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., CCXC (1884), cols. 386–7.
[9] See Shaw-Lefevre addressing Social Science Congress in Birmingham, *The Times*, 18 Sep. 1884.

In twenty-first-century terms, the electorate and the public are taken to be coextensive. The nineteenth century, however, inherited an understanding of the political public which was considerably more inclusive than the pre-, or indeed post-, 1832 electorate. Whilst successive acts of enfranchisement served to narrow this gap, the extension of education and growth in literacy helped preserve the broader conception of the public. When discussing parliamentary elections especially, late Victorians could treat public opinion and the views of the electorate as interchangeable terms, but, generally, the public remained the more capacious category. Late nineteenth-century politics preserved a number of means by which non-electors could contribute to shaping 'public opinion', and the constitutional idiom that remained central to political understandings offered crucial legitimacy to the broader conception of out-of-doors, public opinion. Whilst historians have had much to say about nineteenth-century constitutionalism, most discussion of the place of 'public opinion' within it has focused upon the earlier period.[10]

The centrality of the idea of 'public opinion' to nineteenth-century political debate is matched by its relevance to current historiographical concerns. As Whiggish narratives of democratisation suggest, the period between the second and fourth reform acts has long been central to accounts of the 'modernisation' of British politics. Historians of high politics have often focused instead upon the continuities governing 'politics without democracy' in the long nineteenth century.[11] In recent years, historians of popular politics themselves have increasingly questioned the organising principles of modernisation narratives. The challenge has assumed a variety of forms. James Vernon endorsed the established picture of the growth of party in the era of the secret ballot, but argued that centralisation tamed popular politics and closed, rather than opened, the public sphere, whereas Jon Lawrence has powerfully

[10] There is an extensive literature on constitutionalism. See, in particular, P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991) and *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993) and J. Vernon, ed., *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996).

[11] M. Bentley, *Politics without Democracy: 1815–1914: Perception and Preoccupation in British Government* (London, 1984).

portrayed the limits on party power before 1914 and the enduring dynamism of the localised politics of disruption.[12]

Much of this work has sought to illuminate the discursive field within which popular politics occurred. Whether examining changing references to the 'people' or popular resistance to the claims of 'party', new political historians have sought to excavate the ways in which the contours of political language enabled, and disabled, popular political action.[13] The language of populism was undoubtedly an important component of British political culture, providing a powerful source of rhetorical energy for the likes of Bright and Gladstone. Similarly, quarrels about the place of 'party' in relation to traditions of the open meeting were integral to late Victorian popular politics. Both, however, need to be related to debates about 'public opinion'. Appeals to 'the public' and 'public opinion' were very much part of the arsenal of late Victorian politicians, but, while these terms could be used synonymously with 'the people', their histories and connotations were importantly distinct. Invocation of the public lacked the productivist associations detected by Stedman Jones and Joyce in their accounts of populism.[14] Indeed, the dominant consumerist and intellectualist modes of conceiving of the political public could be quite distant from the radical dichotomy of the idle few and the productive many. However, the emphasis within dominant conceptions of 'public opinion' upon active expression and intensity of belief provided an important bulwark for the legitimacy of open meetings. Equally, the language of 'public opinion' offered significant leverage for those keen to denounce the tyrannical grip of party and the manufacture of opinion through factional organisation. More generally, the language of 'public opinion' provided a crucial means whereby political actors could justify their actions, uphold the importance of their views, and make claims upon the attention of parliament and the executive. As

[12] Vernon, *Politics and the People*; J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

[13] On 'the new political history' see D. Wahrman, 'The new political history', *Social History*, 21 (1996), 343–54; L. Black, '"What kind of people are you?" Labour, the people and the "new political history"', in J. T. Callaghan, S. Fielding & S. Ludlam, *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 23–38.

[14] G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90–178; Joyce, *Visions of the People*, pp. 56–87.

the political system became more open, invocation of 'public opinion' grew, whereas the resonance of the language of 'the people', while retaining real importance during and beyond this period, especially on the left, was nonetheless arguably in decline as far as its political use was concerned.[15] Individuals, groups and institutions all sought to establish representative status for their views as expressions of 'public opinion'. Charting the discursive dynamics of late nineteenth-century politics requires paying systematic attention to the language of 'public opinion'.

One key dimension of the so-called 'new political history' has been a heightened interest in the politics of gender and the gendering of politics. Feminist historians pioneered the study of the gendered basis of politics and have greatly illuminated the social, ideological and discursive constraints on female participation in public life. Lately, the implications for male politicians of prevailing codes of masculinity have come under increasing scrutiny. As McCormack has recently argued, the narrative of separate spheres that underpins much of this literature has been buttressed by the belated historical reception of Habermas's work on the public sphere, with its emphasis upon the gendered character of public life.[16] Nineteenth-century franchise debates clearly demonstrate the enduring resonance of a masculine conception of the independent political citizen which militated against female enfranchisement. However, this should not simply be equated with female exclusion from contemporary conceptions of the political public. As we shall see, whilst the public was scarcely a gender-blind political imaginary, debate about female membership of the public differed significantly from that over the franchise. Indeed, by the 1900s, some opponents of female enfranchisement even argued that female participation in public life rendered the suffrage superfluous.[17]

[15] Detailed support for both these claims is provided in the course of the book. Digitised newspaper databases suggest increased usage of 'public opinion' across the period. Compare the 4902 articles referring to 'public opinion' in *The Times* for 1860–1870 with the 6979 for 1900–1910.

[16] M. McCormack, 'Men, "the public" and political history', in McCormack, ed., *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 2007).

[17] See, for instance, A. V. Dicey, *Letters to a Friend on Votes for Women* (London, 1912, 2nd edn), p. 27.

Habermas's work represents the most celebrated analysis of the late nineteenth-century public sphere.[18] Its narrative of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere has received greater attention from historians than its story of later developments, but its portrayal of social, economic and political pressures deforming the public sphere has been widely echoed in work on the period from 1870 to 1914, most obviously in media history. Habermas offered a general sociological account of the transformation of the public sphere, whereas this book is concerned primarily with the language of 'public opinion' in British political culture. The intellectual history supplied by Habermas is considered in greater detail below, but it is important to recognise the salience of his larger interpretative scheme. Habermas was right to stress the wide-ranging significance of 'public opinion' as a category in the self-understanding of a society. In late nineteenth-century Britain, 'public opinion' was commonly seen as an important economic force, especially in the ordering of industrial relations. The continuing faith invested in the regulatory capacity of a unified, consumerist, yet active, public opinion departs significantly from Habermas's narrative of disillusionment with a fractured passive public, but the capacious conception of society and political economy afforded by his ground-breaking study remains essential in any effort to recover the complex meanings of 'public opinion' in British political culture before 1914.

Media history has been perhaps most sympathetic to Habermas's narrative of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere. It has also paid some attention to ideas of 'public opinion' in these years.[19] Much of this important work, however, has a tendency to equate conceptions of public opinion with attitudes to the press, so underestimating the range of sources in which contemporaries found evidence of 'public opinion'. In its framing intellectual history, much writing about the press adopts a standard narrative of the transition from mid-Victorian rationalistic liberal optimism to fin-de-siècle irrationalist pessimism. Yet, as recent work has begun to show, this approach

[18] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, 1989).

[19] A. Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 1996); M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana, 2004).

both overestimates the individualism and rationalism of earlier liberalisms, and underestimates the resilience of a qualified liberal faith in public reason.[20]

Indeed, the strange survival of liberal England has been a persistent feature of the recent historiography of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain.[21] Whilst disagreement about the origins of Liberal party decline rumbles on, diagnoses of the fate of liberalism as an ideology and as a set of norms are increasingly upbeat. Admittedly, some, particularly those like Vernon who draw upon broadly Foucauldian perspectives, stress the repressive capacities of liberalism, but relatively few currently dispute the strength of its values. Accounts of the difficulties of the Liberal party after 1886 – such as those of Parry and Lawrence – focus upon contemporary perceptions of the Gladstonian party's growing illiberalism, especially its supposedly corrosive moralism: to some extent, conservative success is presented as stemming from adhering more closely to liberal values than the party that claimed to embody them.[22]

There remain, however, important differences over how best to characterise the prevailing values of late nineteenth-century political culture. Colin Matthew and Jon Lawrence supply sharply contrasting accounts of the meanings of the politics of free speech in late Victorian Britain.[23] The legitimacy of centralised party organisation and the desirability of democracy have been very differently assessed in recent work on nineteenth-century liberalism.[24] Investigation of the idiom of 'public opinion' demonstrates notable continuities in the power

[20] H. S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (Basingstoke, 2000); M. Freeden, *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought* (Princeton, 2005).

[21] See E. H. H. Green and D. Tanner, eds, *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge, 2007).

[22] Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*; J. Lawrence, 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), 629–52; J. P. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993).

[23] H. C. G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and politics in Britain, 1860–1950' in P. J. Waller (ed.), *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain: Essays Presented to A. F. Thompson* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 34–58; Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*.

[24] Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*; E. J. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992).

attributed by liberals to intense and reasonable beliefs, whilst also disclosing differing assessments of the representative credentials of various modes of political expression, whether press, platform or petition. In tracing the changing meanings of the language of 'public opinion', we bring the character of late Victorian political culture into much sharper focus.

Changing assessments of the viability and character of Britain's liberal political culture have had important consequences for the historiography of progressivism more generally, and the rise of the Labour party in particular. Many older explanations, most obviously those founded on the emergence of class politics, treated Labour's rise as a step change in the modernisation of British politics, whereby a moribund Liberal party was relegated into obsolescence by rapid economic and social change.[25] Successive waves of revisionist writing have sharply dented many aspects of this picture, revealing both the durability of Britain's liberal political culture and the ambiguities of Labour's relationship to that political culture. Lately, the challenges faced by early Labour politicians seeking to speak for the people have been powerfully anatomised.[26] We lack, however, a comparable study of Labour's discursive relationship to 'the public'. How did Labour politicians and trade unionists seek to represent labour in the polity, given the attractions of free trade and the consumerist tenor of appeals to the public and its interest? Recovering late nineteenth-century debates about the public and its opinion helps us to understand better the character of the early Labour party, and to appreciate more clearly the challenges it faced.

Late Victorian appeals to public opinion were deeply shaped by assumptions associated with liberal political argument. Liberals were not, however, the only group to invoke 'public opinion'. Many studies within intellectual history continue to focus on particular schools, ideologies or traditions, despite much reference to the importance of the argumentative context. Mid-twentieth-century assumptions about

[25] For example, R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910–1924* (London, 1974). For reviews of trends in Labour party historiography, see D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990), and 'Class voting and radical politics: the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910–31' in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), pp. 106–30.

[26] On Labour's relationship to its supposed base, see Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, esp. pp. 227–64.

the importance of ideology, understood as fairly tightly woven sets of action-oriented ideas, often born of the cold war, have cast a surprisingly long shadow on nineteenth-century studies. Recent studies of ideology have, of course, been a good deal more sophisticated, but, arguably, the danger of rendering earlier debates in overly schematic terms remains.[27] More influential, perhaps, has been the paradigm of the political language, familiar from a number of classics of early modern intellectual history.[28] Here, the desire to eschew anachronism produces greater respect for the terms actually employed by contemporaries than was evident in earlier studies of ideology or unit ideas. However, the metaphor of language, or paradigm, can lead to overly tidy accounts of the relationship between ideas which underestimate the overlaps and exchanges in political vocabulary between distinct positions. Reference will be made here to the 'language' of 'public opinion' to denote the cluster of terms and assumptions associated with the term, but doing so is not to presume that this constituted an entrenched interpretative grid. Rather the intention is to explore the full range of ways in which contemporaries deployed the idea of 'public opinion' in the construction of political arguments. In order to do so, however, we need to say a little more about methodology.

Writing conceptual histories

In seeking to write such a history of 'public opinion', an immediate problem is what kind of conceptual history is being written and why. Recent years have seen a proliferation of methodological discussion about how best to do conceptual history. Much turns on what it is thought conceptual history is for. Some manifestos for the enterprise have stressed the consequences for present-day political theory of grasping the genealogies of the concepts we employ in thinking about

[27] Sophisticated treatments include M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1996); E. H. H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002).

[28] Amidst a vast literature, see, for instance, J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985) and *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).