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978-0-521-52787-3 - Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People

Scott L. Althaus

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Introduction

The more completely popular sovereignty prevails in a country, so much the more important is it that the organs of opinion should be adequate to its expression.

– James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*

There are only three questions of any lasting importance to the study of what has since the 18th century been called public opinion. The entire corpus of human knowledge on the subject, from the philosophical inquiries of the ancient Greeks to the most modern statistical analyses, can be seen to unfold from just three enduring points of inquiry and contention: What is public opinion, or in what form ought the concept of public opinion be recognized? What is its nature, or what characteristics should public opinion possess? What kind of political power does it have, or what kind of power should it be given? Although a focus on the *is* became the hallmark of modern research on public opinion even as the work of previous generations emphasized the *ought*, the course of scholarship on public opinion continues to be set by these deceptively profound and complex pole stars. It is a testimony to the knottiness of these questions that definitive answers to them seem as elusive today as they were to the contemporaries of Socrates and Protagoras.

This book is concerned with a particular definition of public opinion that has become generally accepted in recent years, a shortcoming in the nature of this public opinion that calls into question its usefulness in democratic politics, and the potential for this kind of public opinion to reflect the interests of the citizens it is taken to represent. Although the role of public opinion in democratic governance has been a concern of

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political theorists since the time of Plato and Aristotle (Minar 1960), the recent tendency toward equating public opinion with the results of opinion surveys has raised new concerns among social scientists and political philosophers about the role of public opinion as a rudder for the ship of state. How useful can opinion surveys be as inputs to the political process, when most people know little about politics but are nonetheless willing to give opinions on even the most esoteric policy issues when asked to do so by survey researchers?

Given the mass public's dual tendencies toward innocence and glibness on matters of public affairs, it is natural to ask whether the effluence of information about citizen preferences that is produced by opinion polling advances or hinders the progress of democratic rule. At the root of this question is nothing less than the meaning of democracy, for rule by the people is merely a slogan until we clarify how a polity is to recognize the people's will, by which we mean their political interests. All theories of democracy hold at least minimally to the idea that the people's own voice – that is, information provided by the people about their preferences – should have a central role in organizing and overseeing the processes of governance. Yet they offer little guidance on how the voice of the people should be recognized or in what forms it might be embodied.

Most public opinion scholars agree that opinion surveys are useful for mass democracies precisely because they can reveal what the people are thinking. Some go farther, suggesting that opinion surveys are indispensable to democratic politics. Sidney Verba (1996), who has built a career out of analyzing the deficiencies of citizen input to democratic systems, concludes that opinion surveys help compensate for the inherent shortcomings of citizen participation in politics:

Surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce – equal representation for all citizens. The sample survey is rigorously egalitarian; it is designed so that each citizen has an equal chance to participate and an equal voice when participating. (3)

Likewise, in their path-breaking book on collective opinion, Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1992) conclude that the traditional understanding of public opinion as volatile and capricious is incorrect. Collective policy preferences, they argue, have emergent properties that make collective opinion “stable (though not immovable), meaningful, and indeed rational” (14) by compensating for the sometimes erratic opinions of

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individual respondents. This means that

Democracy is not made impossible by default, by public opinion being nonexistent or unknowable or irrelevant. An attentive reader of polls and surveys can get a good deal of coherent guidance about policy. (385)

Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000) go further, arguing that democracy suffers when *Politicians Don't Pander* to the polls:

The public's [surveyed] preferences offer both broad directions to policymakers (e.g., establish universal health insurance) and some specific instructions (e.g., rely on an employer mandate for financing reform). *In general, policymakers should follow these preferences.* . . . What concerns us are indications of declining responsiveness to public opinion and the growing list of policies on which politicians of both major political parties ignore public opinion and supply no explicit justification for it. The practice of American government is drifting from the norms of democratic responsiveness. (xv, xviii; emphasis added)

Even the most optimistic supporters of opinion surveys recognize that polls are not without their problems as indicators of the people's voice. Slight changes in the wording of a question can sometimes lead to drastically different response patterns. Sampling problems and nonresponse error are well-known pitfalls to survey researchers, and the questions that are used in surveys may fail to capture the public's real concerns. While these problems are worthy of serious attention, there is an even greater problem about which few seem aware or concerned: the public's low levels and uneven social distribution of political knowledge diminish the quality of political representation provided by opinion surveys. Despite all appearances to the contrary, this problem is so pervasive as to call into question whether opinion surveys can tell us reliably what the people really want.

The timeworn finding of nearly a half century of survey research is that "textbook" information about the political process is scarce and unevenly distributed to the mass public. "There now seems to be a consensus," notes Robert Luskin, "that by anything approaching elite standards most citizens think and know jaw-droppingly little about politics" (2002: 282). Since so few people appear knowledgeable about public affairs, one might wonder whether collective policy preferences revealed in opinion surveys accurately convey the distribution of voices and interests in a society.

To date, this vital question has received only indirect attention from social scientists and survey researchers. This study, the first comprehensive treatment of the relationships among knowledge, representation, and

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political equality in opinion surveys, suggests some surprising answers. Knowledge does matter, and the way it is distributed in society can cause collective preferences to reflect disproportionately the opinions of some groups more than others. To the extent that opinion polls influence democratic politics, the uneven social distribution of political knowledge may impair the responsiveness of governments to their citizens.¹

OPINION SURVEYS AS THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

The public's surveyed opinions on policy issues are often used to hold elected officials accountable to their constituents, as a feedback loop between governments and citizens, and as a medium for the mass public to communicate with itself. They may also provide an important channel for political representation by conveying information to political leaders about the mind of a populace so vast and varied as to be inscrutable save through the medium of the sample survey.

Before the middle of the 20th century, the voice of the people was commonly discerned through election results, the activities of organized groups, and the attentions of the press. Yet the ambiguous nature of these "organs of public opinion" (Bryce 1891) limited their usefulness as mirrors of the public mind. For example, while the popular vote has long served as a formal mechanism for registering the people's will, election results are inherently contestable as indicators of the people's voice. Does a victory for one candidate over another indicate support for the winner's policy positions, dislike for the losing candidate, satisfaction with the status quo, or something else? Added to the range of possible meanings that can be assigned to elections is the problem of nonparticipation. Bill Clinton won the American presidency in 1992 with 43% of the vote in an election where only 55% of those eligible turned out to cast a ballot. Consequently, Clinton was elected to preside over a nation in which 76% of the adult population either voted against him or failed to vote at all. While we are in the habit of recognizing the results of free and fair elections as binding and legitimate, the nonparticipation problem makes it difficult to know whether a procedure that could somehow reflect the will of every

¹ By *opinion poll* or *survey* I mean specifically those that measure self-reported opinions about political topics. We know that surveys can be a very useful tool for measuring past behavior in a population, and a reasonable tool for assessing potential behavior (like the propensity to vote), but the focus in this book is more narrowly on the use of survey methods to measure attitudinal information that might subsequently be employed as an indicator of that contested concept we call public opinion.

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citizen might produce a different outcome. The natural advantages accruing to wealthy and privileged interests in group politics have likewise cast doubt on the likelihood that all relevant voices are properly represented in the group system, or that any particular group properly represents the people in whose interests it claims to act. In similar ways, the commercial motives of the press and its lack of formal accountability to citizens limit its ability to represent the people's voice.

While elections and the activities of groups may remain the most decisive channels of public opinion in democratic societies, since the 1930s there has been a growing acceptance of opinion polling as a superior channel for conveying or representing the voice of a people (J. M. Converse 1987; P. E. Converse 1987). Because opinion surveys solicit views from a representative sample of a population and are intended to be nonideological and scientific, they provide what many believe to be a clearer and more inclusive indicator of a public's will than had been available through more traditional indicators of public opinion. This view of opinion polling was championed by influential pioneers of survey research like George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, Harold Gosnell, and Elmo Roper, who promoted opinion surveys as a corrective to the problems inherent in using election results and group activity as indicators of what the people want from government (e.g., Gallup and Rae 1940; Gosnell 1940). Although opinion surveys are unlikely to rival the legitimacy of elections as formal expressions of the public will, they are unique in their ability to serve as a communication medium linking citizens to representatives: they allow the individual members of a polity to speak in a collective voice *as* a public on important issues of the day. As a consequence, opinion surveys may be the mass public's clearest and most influential voice in the routine conduct of democratic politics that occurs between infrequent elections.

All theories of democracy regard free and fair elections as crucial for realizing popular sovereignty (Dahl 1989; Held 1987; Manin 1997), and many theories posit that the common good arises out of the competition for power among organized groups (e.g., Dahl 1956; Sartori 1987; Schattschneider 1960; Schumpeter [1942] 1976). But while elections and groups are standard elements of most models of democracy, political philosophers have provided little guidance about whether the opinion polls that are so commonplace today might serve useful purposes in democratic politics. The preferences of ordinary citizens play important foundational roles in most models of democracy, but the communication processes by which those preferences are represented to governing officials and institutions have received little sustained attention from political

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scientists, communication researchers, and democratic theorists. To borrow a phrase from Walter Lippmann (1922: 239), it would seem in the case of opinion polling that “the practice of democracy has been ahead of its theory.”

The problem is that opinion polling makes it possible to distinguish collective decisions from collective preferences. Elections produce collective decisions, which are the legitimate, binding, and constitutionally recognized forms of popular sovereignty. Elections also produce collective preferences about what the people want. American voters in 1992 elected a Democratic president after 12 years of Republican leadership, which indicates a collective preference for change of some sort. While decisive, election results have always provided ambiguous and contestable signals about the reasons why the people voted this way or that, and the vast scale of modern democratic institutions added to the difficulty of sorting out what the people collectively desired from what the people collectively did on election day. The rise of the sample survey made it possible not only to clarify the meaning of collective decisions through exit polling but, more important, to separate information about collective preferences from the activity of collective decisions. Opinion polling introduced the collective preference as a new form of popular sovereignty, but after half a century there is still no clear standing within democratic theory for the voice of a people divorced from its vote.

This gap between theory and practice may stem in part from the tendency among political theorists in the liberal tradition to focus on institutional design and structures of representation as keys to successful governance by the people. Pure democracy was controversial even among the ancient Athenians, and modern research on social choice theory has concluded that aside from the problems of political instability inherent in “rule by the mob,” there are no methods for aggregating individual preferences that can satisfy even the minimal requirements one would expect for democratic rule (Arrow 1963; Riker 1982).² While at least one scholar has founded a justification for democratic rule on the idea of random sampling (Swabey 1937), and while the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill has made important contributions to democratic thinking, it is safe to characterize the broadest currents of work in democratic theory as suspicious of the potential for simple preference aggregation to reveal the common good, which by extension implicates polling. Much

² However, this problem may be less serious than it sounds. See my discussion on this point in Chapter 7.

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of this doubt is cast by critics of liberal conceptions of democracy (e.g., Arendt 1958; Barber 1984; Habermas 1989, 1996a), but the premise that all preferences are created equal has come under fire even from defenders of the liberal tradition, who recognize that a citizen's interests can be at odds with her preferences (e.g., Bachrach 1967, 1975; Dahl 1989; Sunstein 1991). So while political philosophers have said little about the ability of surveys to convey the voice of the people, what they do say indirectly about the theoretical rationale underlying opinion polling reflects poorly on the potential for survey results to represent the will of the people.

In contrast to the philosophical literature relevant to opinion polling, empirical work on public opinion has tended to accept opinion surveys as an important indicator of the people's voice, but also to conclude that what individuals say through opinion polls is often shallow, coarse, vacillating, and illogical. So widely accepted is this premise that in recent years only two theoretical arguments have been successfully advanced to support the idea that the voice of the people conveyed through polls or elections can be reasonable, adaptive, meaningful, and consistent. The first of these, an obscure application of statistical probability theory known as the Condorcet Jury Theorem, was developed more than 200 years ago (Condorcet 1785, 1995) but had been regularly forgotten and rediscovered until its potential value to democratic theory was clarified by social choice theorists in the last 20 years. The second of these arguments points to the error-reducing properties of statistical aggregation and is most fully elaborated in the collective rationality models of Page and Shapiro (1992) and Philip Converse (1990).³ As detailed in Chapter 2, the Condorcet Jury Theorem and collective rationality arguments posit that so long as the preferences of individuals share certain plausible distributional characteristics, collective preferences should be good indicators of what the people want from government, even if individuals are as loose in their thinking as the empirical literature often reveals. In addition to rehabilitating survey results as useful organs of the people's voice, these arguments raise the possibility that something like the will of the people might be discerned through the results of opinion surveys.

Yet we still do not know whether these arguments explain what actually happens when individual opinions are aggregated into collective preferences. While these theoretical accounts of the superiority of collective

³ The term *collective rationality* comes from Page and Shapiro, but as the statistical logic used by Converse is so similar, I use the term to describe both models.

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preferences over individual opinions have been widely accepted by social scientists, there is little direct evidence that the mechanics of aggregation at the heart of these arguments actually produce collective opinions more worthy of political consideration than the individual preferences of which they are composed.

Another important limitation in the literature on opinion surveys in democratic politics is that regardless of whether the potential impact of polls is being criticized or praised, the debate on these points rarely ventures beyond the narrow question of whether polls are generally good or generally bad for democracy.⁴ This focus has contributed to a polarized debate that seems to impel participants toward the boundaries of Panglossian cheer or Jerimanic gloom. In the literature on the Condorcet Jury Theorem, terms like “perfection” (Miller 1986: 175) and “infallible” (Ladha 1992: 619) are commonly used to salute the apparent competence and wisdom of majority decisions made by large groups. Likewise, the statistical logic of Page and Shapiro’s collective rationality argument leads them to deduce that the mass public’s collective opinions on subjects as arcane as the number of missiles needed for effective nuclear deterrence should be just as robust and sensible as its opinions on more familiar subjects like prayer in the schools or affirmative action policy (1992: 19–23). At the other extreme are critics like Charles Salmon and Theodore Glasser, who conclude that “When used as a gauge of ‘public opinion,’ . . . polls not only miss the mark but shift the target. . . . Polls offer at best a naïve and narrow view of democracy” (1995: 449). Likewise, Benjamin Ginsberg argues that the widespread use of polling alters the nature of public opinion by drawing attention away from the threat of actions by organized citizen groups, thereby “robbing opinion of precisely those features that might maximize its impact on government and policy” (1986: 83). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979) concludes bluntly that “public opinion does not exist,” and that polls construct a fictitious public mind to serve the symbolic ends of the powers that be. While broad claims such as these serve to clarify the points of contention, they are somewhat less helpful in advancing the debate about polls into more fruitful territory. Opinion surveys might produce some negative consequences for democracy, but that should not prevent us from exploring whether there are better techniques

⁴ For some exceptions to the tendency for scholars to divide themselves on the question of whether polls are generally good (e.g., P. E. Converse 1987; Converse 1996; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Page and Shapiro 1992; Verba 1996; Warren 2001) or bad for democracy (Bourdieu 1979; Ginsberg 1986; Herbst 1993; Rogers 1949; Weissberg 2002a; Wheeler 1976), see Geer 1996; Price and Neijens 1997; Yankelovich 1991.

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of polling or more appropriate roles for surveys to fill. Opinion surveys might provide some benefits to democracy, but that should not distract us from the potential for surveys to undermine government responsiveness and confound the workings of Leviathan.

In light of the uses to which opinion polls are routinely put in modern democracies, this book explores two critical areas of concern. First, do citizens have enough knowledge about the political world to regularly formulate policy preferences that are consistent with their needs, wants, and values? And second, is the quality of political representation provided by opinion surveys adequate for the uses to which they are put in democratic politics? One aim of the book is to put the power of aggregation to the test, first by providing a comprehensive assessment of the information-pooling properties of collective opinion (Chapter 2), and then by examining whether the opinions expressed in sample surveys possess the critical characteristics necessary for collective rationality to work (Chapter 3). Another goal is to clarify how the low levels and uneven social distribution of political knowledge affect the quality of representation afforded by collective preferences (Chapters 4–6). By demonstrating how information effects can influence the usefulness of survey results in democratic politics, this book also seeks to chart a middle course between the champions and skeptics of the polling enterprise by detailing how the use of surveys to represent the voice of the people can be inherently problematic while at the same time acknowledging the potential for this unique medium of citizen communication to enhance the practice of democracy (Chapter 7 and 8).

As other observers of this debate have pointed out (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Kuklinski and Quirk 2001; Price and Neijens 1997; Yankelovich 1991), what is needed to move the discussion forward are clear normative standards for assessing the usefulness of surveyed opinion as an input to democratic governance. Toward this end, this book examines the quality of political representation provided by surveys. It does so through a statistical analysis of representation in surveys where quality is analyzed from the standpoint of two foundational concepts in democratic theory: the degree to which surveys regard and promote the political equality of all individuals in a population, and the likelihood that surveys represent the political interests of all individuals in a population.

The following chapters suggest that sometimes collective preferences seem to represent something like the will of the people, but frequently they do not. Sometimes they rigidly enforce political equality in the expression of political viewpoints, but often they do not. In the final analysis, the

primary culprit is not any inherent shortcoming in the methods of survey research. Rather, it is the limited degree of knowledge held by ordinary citizens about public affairs and the tendency for some kinds of people to be better informed than others.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PUBLIC OPINION

One long-standing concern about the usefulness and validity of survey data as an input to the political process arose from the finding that Americans habitually ignore the world of public affairs (Almond 1950; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell, Converse et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Key 1961; Patterson 1980). The following pages present a brief review of this controversy as well as the reasons why many scholars are less concerned today about the public’s knowledge of politics than they were a decade ago.

Overall Levels of Political Knowledge Are Low

Survey after survey has shown that citizens are often at a loss to relate basic facts about the players, issues, and rules of the game that structure American political life (Bennett 1988; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Converse 1964, 1970; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Neuman 1986; Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin and Dimock 1999; Price 1999; Smith 1989). For example, the 1992 American National Election Studies included a wide array of questions designed to measure the public’s knowledge of politics. The ability of respondents to answer these questions correctly is, to put it mildly, underwhelming (for similar results from other years, see Appendix A). Table 1.1 shows that while nearly 9 in 10 respondents were able to identify Dan Quayle as the vice president of the United States (up from 74% in 1989), only a quarter could identify Tom Foley as Speaker of the House. Just 6 in 10 were able to say that the president nominates federal judges and that the Supreme Court, rather than Congress or the president, decides the constitutionality of laws. While 57% of respondents could identify the Republican Party as being more conservative than the Democratic Party, only about half could say that the Republican Party favored reducing government services and increasing defense spending more than the Democratic Party. Flipping a coin would have produced comparable results. The public hardly fared better when identifying important policy positions staked out by the candidates. Fewer than two-thirds of respondents were able to locate George Bush