COMMUNICATION

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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE COMMUNICATION OF CONSENT

EDITED BY THEODORE L. GLASSER AND CHARLES T. SALMON

Introduction by Elihu Katz

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By design, then, there is no single theme or overarching perspective that binds together the chapters in this book. We have not tried to reconcile contrasting—even competing—conceptions of public opinion, nor have we insisted on any conceptual or intellectual orthodoxy with regard to the study of communication. Rather, we have solicited work that represents what we believe to be the full range of contemporary discussion on public opinion and what communication portends for its study.

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Contents

Introduction: The State of the Art xxi
Elihu Katz

I. THE NATURE OF PUBLIC OPINION

1. **Historical Tensions in the Concept of Public Opinion** 3
John Durham Peters

2. **Public Opinion and Rationality** 33
Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

3. **Levels of Analysis in Public Opinion Research** 55
Jack McLeod, Zhongdang Pan, and Dianne Rucinski

II. THE INSTITUTION OF PUBLIC OPINION

4. **On the Disappearance of Groups: 19th- and Early 20th-Century Conceptions of Public Opinion** 89
Susan Herbst

5. **The Industry of Public Opinion** 105
Peter V. Miller

6. **The Press and the Illusion of Public Opinion: The Strange Case of Ronald Reagan's "Popularity"** 132
Elliot King and Michael Schudson

7. **Propaganda and the Technological System** 156
Clifford G. Christians

III. SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXTS FOR PUBLIC OPINION

8. **Social–Psychological Perspectives on Public Opinion** 177
Vincent Price and Hayg Oshagan

9. **The Cognitive Revolution in Public Opinion and Communication Research** 217
James R. Beniger and Jodi A. Gusek

10. **Opinions, Perception, and Social Reality** 249
Carroll J. Glynn, Ronald E. Ostman, and Daniel G. McDonald

IV. THE MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION AND THE OPINIONS OF PUBLICS

11. **Issues in the News and the Public Agenda: The Agenda-Setting Tradition** 281
Maxwell McCombs, Lucig Danielian, and Wayne Wanta

12. **Conflict, Consensus, and Public Opinion** 301
Clarice N. Olien, George A. Donohue, and Phillip J. Tichenor

13. **Origins and Consequences of Mediated Public Opinion** 323
Klaus Schoenbach and Lee B. Becker

14. **Making News and Manufacturing Consent: The Journalistic Narrative and Its Audience** 348
Gertrude J. Robinson

V. PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY

15. **The Press, Public Opinion, and Public Discourse** 373
James W. Carey

16. **The Influence of Rationality Claims on Public Opinion and Policy** 403
Murray Edelman

17. **Public Opinion as Public Judgment** 417
Harry C. Boyte

18. **The Politics of Polling and the Limits of Consent** 437
Charles T. Salmon and Theodore L. Glasser

Author Index 459

Subject Index 471

4

On the Disappearance of Groups: 19th- and Early 20th-Century Conceptions of Public Opinion

Susan Herbst

Questions about the nature of public opinion, and how best to gauge the popular sentiment, are as old as democratic theory itself. As Peters (Chapter 1 in this volume) and other scholars have pointed out, Plato, Aristotle, and a variety of pre-Enlightenment thinkers struggled to conceptualize the essence of public opinion, usually within the context of debates about human nature. Several of these theorists, like Machiavelli, wrote eloquently about the importance of "sensing" the public sentiment, by monitoring peoples' behavior, listening to their grievances, and sustaining a dialogue among elites about the public. Despite a keen interest in public opinion among theorists and statesmen, however, an obsession with the systematic measurement of public opinion emerged much later, in the highly charged partisan atmosphere of mid-19th-century America.

In this chapter, I explore how public opinion was expressed and measured in the days before the diffusion of the "sample" or "scientific" survey. While the history of opinion measurement is an extraordinarily long one, there are some discernable trends in that lengthy narrative. After a brief discussion of definitional problems surrounding the phrase

"public opinion," and a sketch of some historical trends, I focus on the expression and assessment of the popular mood in the mid-19th century—a particularly interesting period for historians of public opinion. During that era, a growing number of citizens, party leaders, statesmen, and scholars became interested in polling. Ironically, however, there was a fundamental contradiction between the aggregation-oriented assumptions of polling and the arrangement of political institutions at the time. Although "public opinion" connoted the activities of *groups* (parties, in particular) in the years just before and after the Civil War, methodologies for assessing public opinion increasingly focused on *individuals*. Evaluating polling in the 19th and early 20th centuries not only sheds light on the roots of contemporary survey research; it also forces us to ask a variety of important questions about the changing assumptions and definitions behind opinion assessment methodologies.

As a preface, I should note that this chapter is not an argument for a new definition of public opinion, although that is how many essays on this topic begin or conclude (e.g., Key, 1961). I do, however, ask the reader to shed his or her preconceptions about the meaning of public opinion, in order to imagine how the phrase might have been used and understood at a time when our political culture was very different. Although 20th-century political operatives, scholars, and practitioners began to reach a general agreement about the meaning of public opinion in the 1920s (e.g., Holcombe, 1925), the definition of the phrase was rarely discussed before that time by anyone at all. These days we tend to believe that public opinion is the aggregation of individual opinions as measured by the sample survey. Despite resistance from a few social theorists (e.g., Blumer, 1948; Bourdieu, 1979), this definition is now hegemonic: when most of us consider the meaning of public opinion, we can't help but think about polls or surveys. Yet since it wasn't always this way, historians of public opinion must try to piece together past connotations of "public opinion" by evaluating memoirs, newspapers, civics texts, and other cultural artifacts.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF PUBLIC OPINION: MEANING AND MEASUREMENT

Before we can speak about measuring public opinion (or any other construct), we have to define it. Unfortunately, tracking the origins of "public opinion," and sketching changes in the meaning of the phrase, has been one of the most frustrating of all projects in intellectual history. Uncovering the history of events, or tracing the development of a social group over time is always difficult: archival sources may be hard to find, and records, once discovered, are often incomplete or of dubious veracity. Yet trying to understand the development of a *concept* is among the most baffling tasks for the historian, who typically wants to link that concept to changes in social structure, economic trends, or political upheaval. A few scholars have been somewhat successful in tracing the connotations of important words or phrases over time (e.g., Condit & Lucaites, 1993; Rodgers, 1987), but there are inevitable gaps in the narratives they present.

A variety of researchers, from a variety of fields, have attempted to map the evolving meaning of "public opinion," but at this point, the history of the phrase is largely incoherent. Some scholars collect and analyze as many definitions as they can find (e.g., Childs, 1965). Others bring a theoretical agenda to the history, in order to demonstrate definitional consistency over time (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1984), while still others try to link definitions with great theorists, statesmen, or social movements (e.g., Bauer, 1930; Minar, 1960; Palmer, 1934, 1964; Speier, 1950; Tonnies, 1957; See also Gollin & Gollin, 1973).

There are several reasons why defining public opinion is so complex and frustrating. First, there is the problem of intellectual history versus social history. Philosophers have written about public opinion or synonymous phrases (e.g., Rousseau described the "general will"), but those without education or high social status probably thought about public opinion and persuasion as well, even if they didn't produce philsophical tracts on the subject (see Bauer, 1930). In writing about the history of public opinion, then, one is constantly torn between the words used by great men and the actions of (and implicit meanings of public opinion among) common folk. Choosing between these two approaches is troubling, and there are tremendous analytical problems associated with each. With the formal philosophical tracts, it is often unclear whether the theorist is making normative arguments about the way public opinion *should* be defined, or descriptive arguments about the way it was defined at the time of his writing. In terms of the social (or "low") history of public opinion, one is forced to look for connotations of the phrase in the actions of the masses—bread riots, petitioning, fragments of public speeches, and so on—for which archives are scanty.

In addition, public opinion has been defined differently by different parties because they had idiosyncratic agendas: Marx wrote about the public sentiment in order to demonstrate how it was shaped by historical circumstance, and by economic arrangements in particular. Rousseau wrote about public opinion because he was interested in the essence of human nature, and the ingredients of the social contract. Gallup wrote about public opinion in the context of measurement

through aggregation, and his efforts were animated by entrepreneurial goals as well as intellectual ones. While some of these writers were more eloquent or rigorous than others, it is futile (and unfair) to characterize these tracts as right or wrong.

One way to approach the history of public opinion is to avoid discovering the true meaning of the phase, and simply grant that the definition is fluid. It changes with transformations in social structure, economic and political reform, and technological advances (see Habermas, 1974; Herbst, 1993). I believe that in order to trace the changing definition of public opinion we must evaluate what *Annales* historian Ferdinand Braudel has called the *longue durée* (Braudel, 1980)—the long, extended history that reaches across periods and across regions. Focusing on the *longue durée* demands that one look for broad structural trends in history, studying "whole centuries at a time" (p. 74), as Braudel himself does so well in his work on the Mediterranean (1973). Perhaps the most successful student of the *longue durée* in the area of public opinion is Jürgen Habermas, whose early work on the subject considered the popular sentiment over several centuries in several nations (Habermas, 1989).

TRENDS IN THE HISTORY OF PUBLIC OPINION

If we take Braudel's advice seriously, and concentrate on the *longue durée*, we can discern several interesting trends in the history of public opinion—its meaning *and* its measurement. No matter how hard we try to separate the two, they are so often conflated that it is best to recognize and highlight their connections, and try to learn something from these connections. Three trends in the social history of public opinion are: (1) a shift from the "bottom-up" to the "top-down" communication of popular sentiment; (2) the increasing rationalization of opinion expression and measurement; and (3) growing anonymity in the articulation of opinions.

Benjamin Ginsberg (1986) noted the first trend in the history of public opinion, arguing that voting and opinion polling were techniques introduced *by the state* in the early 18th century in order to manipulate or "domesticate" public opinion. While election results and survey responses are evidence of public opinion, the format and intensity of these opinions is dictated by the state. In contrast, he attempts to show (albeit with limited evidence), that early expressions of public opinion—food riots, destruction of property, petitioning, and so on—came directly *from the people* and were therefore more honest and more reliable. While his argument may be difficult for us to swallow, since

most nations seem to have become more and not less democratic over time, Ginsberg's analysis is quite compelling. There are still riots and demonstrations in the 20th century, yet polling and voting have probably obviated, to some extent, the need for these sorts of protest. Conducting surveys and polls is a way that elites can structure public opinion, and control it.

Along these lines, I have argued that opinion polling is an important means of surveillance. In the days before the diffusion of the sample survey, public opinion would erupt with very little warning. In the 17th century local elites might have known that the peasants were unhappy, but it was hard to predict when they might engage in rioting. In the 20th century, on the other hand, private polling by leaders, in combination with published polls, enable elites to monitor opinions more closely and steadily. This form of opinion surveillance mimics, in some ways, forms of panoptic observation described by Michel Foucault (see Foucault, 1979; Herbst, 1993, pp. 23–27; Peer, 1992).

A second trend in the history of public opinion is that of escalating rationalization. Max Weber (1946, 1958, 1978) has argued that all aspects of social life, from the laws we live by to the emotions we express in private, have become increasingly more systematized and formalized over time. While Weber concentrated on the growth of bureaucracy, which provides evidence for the increasing structuration of our lives, even our most intimate activities have become more organized and "arranged." For example, the appearance of computer dating services, support groups, 800 help "hotlines," and other such phenomena all underscore the increasing formalization of our social practices. As I have argued elsewhere, public opinion has not escaped the trend toward increasing rationalization: our means of communicating to our leaders, and their attempts to monitor our feelings, have become more and more systematized over time (Herbst, 1993, pp. 43–68). On the one hand, growing rationalization is a good thing, since organizing practices leads to efficiency in reaching goals (in this case, understanding the public mood). Yet the rationalization of public opinion has also meant that our feelings and beliefs are channeled and labeled. Closed-ended survey questions and referenda "tap into" our belief systems, but they limit the character, and intensity of our political expressions.

With regard to the third trend, public opinion expression was usually *attributed* before the diffusion of the general election and the sample survey. It was difficult to make one's feelings known, about a political, economic, or social issue, without somehow taking responsibility for those opinions. In the 20th century, however, with the growing popularity of survey research, anonymity characterizes opinion expression. When one is polled, usually over the telephone, he or she is

assured that all opinions expressed are confidential: the pollster will never link a respondent's name to his or her opinions. Like rationalization, growing anonymity in opinion expression has positive and negative aspects. People may feel more freedom to express their ideas when they know that their name will never be published in connection with their beliefs. Yet without attribution, people are never responsible for their opinions and may take the entire expression process less seriously than they would otherwise.

This brief sketch of trends in opinion expression and measurement provides a background for a discussion of public opinion in the mid-19th century. In many ways, the 19th century is a transition period. We can find traces of all the trends outlined above, although top-down measurement approaches, rationalization, and anonymity were not nearly as evident as they are today. Most interesting, however, is the way that a new technique of opinion measurement—the straw poll—collided with the highly partisan political structure of the period.

COMMUNICATION OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Popular politics in the mid-19th century revolved around elections, as it does today. Local, state, and national campaigns structured political life in the young republic, and elections served as powerful symbols of freedom and sovereignty. Without a doubt, the most important force in mid-19th-century politics was partisanship. Parties performed a variety of functions: They mobilized the public, served as channels for opinion expression, educated the people about issues, organized debate about those issues, and disbursed resources and patronage jobs to their loyalists, among other things. Michael McGerr, in his fascinating book about northern politics after the Civil War, describes the role of partisanship in American life this way:

> Party was an essentially simple creed, but one woven deeply and intricately into the pattern of Northern society. Partisanship entailed more than attachment to a particular political organization. For mid-19th-century Northerners, party became a natural lens through which to view the world. Most men found it second nature to perceive events from a partisan perspective and to imagine a black-and-white world of absolutes, of political friends and enemies. . . . Mid-19th-century partisanship was aggressive, demonstrative, contentious, and often vicious. Party membership was part of men's identity; as such, their partisanship had to be paraded and asserted in public. (1986, p. 14)

And asserted it was. Politics was serious business in the mid-19th century, but it was also one of the major forms of entertainment during the period. While women played only symbolic roles in politics, and were, along with blacks and other marginalized groups, relegated to the sidelines (Ryan, 1990), men found considerable satisfaction in public displays of partisanship. Membership in parties was extremely high, as was straight-ticket voting, but even more interesting was the way that people expressed their feelings for their parties in the streets. Torchlight parades, pole-raising, and rallies of various sorts always attracted large numbers of men, and the excitement associated with politics was contagious. Turnout among eligible voters was often as high as 80% in national elections, and historians estimate that from 20 to 25% of electors were immersed in campaigning—attending rallies, organizing events, distributing campaign materials, and marching in parades (Dinkin, 1989).

Parties depended upon their loyalists to help shape public opinion during and between campaigns, but the newspaper was one of the more effective means of spreading party ideology. The parties supported many newspapers by awarding them large printing contracts, and often simply subsidized them directly (see Baldasty, 1992). As a result, the typical 19th-century newspaper had a very obvious political slant, which ran throughout the text. The distinction made today between editorial and news reporting was not conventional. As late as 1891, James Bryce, British statesman and visitor to the United States, could still write:

> As the advocates of political doctrines, newspapers are of course powerful, because they are universally read and often ably written. . . . What struck me was that in America a leading article carries less weight of itself, being discounted by the shrewd reader as the sort of thing which the paper must of course be expected to say, and is effective only when it takes hold of some fact (real or supposed), and hammers it into the public mind. (p. 264)

Newspapers, Bryce argues, were indispensable to parties who needed to influence as well as monitor public opinion.

Parties and public opinion were intertwined in the mid-19th century far more than they are today. In the 20th century, with the decline of partisanship, public opinion seems an independent force that is expressed through news reports and survey data. In the 19th century, however, parties were integral to the very infrastructure of public opinion—its meaning, its forms of expression, and its measurement (see Herbst & Beniger, 1994). To think of public opinion apart from the parties would have been odd, since parties held such a tight grip on the

nature of political debate. Indeed, party activity *defined* public opinion in the 19th century. Party strength was such that de Tocqueville noted of the American political scene:

> Lacking in great parties, the United States is creeping with small ones and public opinion is broken up ad infinitum about questions of detail. It is impossible to imagine the trouble they take to create parties; it is not an easy matter now. . . . The ambitious are bound to create parties, for it is difficult to turn the man in power out simply for the reason that one would like to take his place. Hence all the skill of politicians consists in forming parties. (1969, p. 177)

Both Bryce and de Tocqueville, in their travels, noted repeatedly how public opinion was cultivated and expressed by parties. And contemporary historians of American politics have even found jokes, humorous slogans, and songs that attest to the relationship between popular sentiment and the parties:

> Now, to keep all these glorious feeturs
> Thet characterize morril an' reasonin' creeturs,
> Thet give every paytriot all he can cram,
> Thet oust the untrustworthy Presidunt Flam,
> An' stick honest Presidunt Sham in his place,
> To the manifest gain o' the holl human race,
> An' to some indervidgewals on't in partickler,
> Who love Public Opinion an' know how to tickle her,-
> I say thet a party with gret aims like these
> Must stick jest ez close ez a hive full o' bees.
> (quoted in Baker, 1985, p. 178; see also Baker, 1983)

Parties were not the only group that channeled public opinion in the 19th century, of course. There were a variety of smaller, less influential associations and clubs. James Q. Wilson (1973), for example, has noted that a tremendous number of interest groups first appeared in the mid-19th century: the National Grange, Elks, Knights of Pythias, college fraternities, and craft unions, among others. Yet when it came to popular, electoral politics, parties were crucial.

While the parties enjoyed their "golden age" of influence in the mid-19th century, there was a parallel development in the communication of public opinion. Journalists and party activists themselves became increasingly infatuated with the "straw poll" or "straws" as they were often called. Straw polls are unscientific surveys, conducted orally or with pen and paper, usually before an election. It isn't quite clear why the polls were called "straws," but labeling the polls this way

implied that they were mock (or false) votes in the same way that a "straw man" is an artificial argument. Although straw polls are still conducted, through radio and television call-in programs or by roving photographers working for *USA Today*, policy makers, candidates, journalists, and political activists pay much more attention to data derived from sample surveys.

Most students of public opinion are familiar with the famous *Literary Digest* polls of the early 20th century. The *Digest* polled thousands of individuals through the mail, and despite its unscientific methodology, was successful in predicting U.S. presidential election outcomes until 1936. The *Digest*'s editors were humiliated by their failure to predict a Roosevelt victory, and the *Digest* ceased publication shortly thereafter.

Although the story of the *Digest* provides a good cautionary lesson to today's pollsters, the straw polls of the 19th century are far more interesting than the huge *Digest* polls. Unlike the *Digest* polls, early straw votes were conducted with the unique brand of creativity and flair that characterized partisan politics of the period. Since newspapers were extremely partisan in the mid-19th century, editors used straw polls constantly before elections, to boost the image of their favored candidates. Results of straw polls were woven into the texture of partisan periodicals in ways that seems quite foreign to us today: the polls were clearly thought to be scientific or predictive, yet they were employed primarily as rhetorical weapons in the fierce, ideological war of words that preceded most elections.[1] During the weeks just before an election, major newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* or *The New York Times* would often print several polls a week. There were three types of straw polls commonly published in the typical 19th-century daily: those conducted by reporters for the newspaper, those conducted by party activists or a like-minded paper in another city, or those sent to a newspaper by voters themselves.

Often, journalists would travel great distances to cover a campaign, and conducted straw polls on trains or steamers on the way to a rally or demonstration. Reporters asked for a show of hands, or approached people as they headed toward hotels, taverns, or fairgrounds. Vote tallies were then reported in their articles, and used to buttress their analyses of the campaign. Often, journalists would obtain straw vote results from factory managers who polled their employees, or from party workers. In this example, from the 1896 race between McKinley and Bryan, a *Chicago Tribune* journalist wrote:

> Estimates received at Republican National headquarters indicate that 90 per cent of the railway employees favor the St. Louis platform and nomi-

> nees. The activity shown by them in organizing sound money clubs throughout the country is given as evidence in proof of these estimates. . . . A visitor from Nebraska said he knew of thirty sound money Populists in one neighborhood out there who would cast their ballots this year for the Republican candidate. (8/27, p. 12)

The same sorts of polls were often shared among like-minded partisan papers in particular regions, while straws and election estimates from opposing papers were criticized. Despite their own fascination with quantitative prediction, the staunchly Republican editors of the *Tribune* often mocked the political arithmetic of other opposing dailies, as in this 1876 piece:

> The Madison *Democrat* ciphers out the result of the Presidential election by logarithms, or the integral calculus, and gives TILDEN 206 votes to 168 for HAYES. In order to secure these estimates it grabs Wisconsin's 10 votes for TILDEN. It very coolly walks off with the electoral votes of New York, California, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oregon, which shows the foolishness, if not idiocy, of such figuring. (9/30, p. 4)

In general, the partisan papers of the 19th century approved of straw votes, and predictions derived from those polls, when they needed them for rhetorical purposes. Yet these same papers argued against such methods when straws were employed by other papers.

Perhaps the most intriguing types of straws were those sent in by ordinary readers, who paid close attention to politics. Since men looked to party politics as a form of entertainment, conducting straw polls among friends, neighbors, and coworkers was great fun. It enabled social comparison, and was most probably a starting point for dialogue about the upcoming election. A *Tribune* reader with the initials "J. B. C." sent in this letter, the summer before the 1856 presidential campaign between Buchanan, Fremont, and Fillmore:

> Below you will find a statement of a vote taken on the train of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroad, to-day, August 25th: Fremont, 88; Buchanan, 30; Fillmore, 10.
>
> Yours truly,
>
> J. B. C.
>
> P.S. Several of those tallied for Buchanan were unnaturalized Irish catholics. (8/26, p. 3)

On the same day, the *Tribune* printed this letter from another reader:

> CAR VOTING.—Editors Tribune: Gents—The following is the result of a canvass I made on the Saturday evening train to Milwaukee. Among the gentlemen, Fillmore 5, Buchanan 13, Fremont 41.—Among the ladies, of whom about one half only voted, the vote was, Fremont 9, Fillmore 2, Buchanan ("purely out of sympathy for his lonesome condition ") one. (8/26, p. 3).
>
> Yours, SC,
>
> E. F. B.

The straws sent in by readers are indicative of just how well the parties had mobilized its loyalists. Men not only turned out for rallies and torchlight parades in great numbers; they also canvassed for the party, making quantitative estimates of public opinion wherever possible—while traveling by train or in their own communities.

That straw votes were popular is obvious to scholars who immerse themselves in the discourse of mid- and late 19th-century newspapers. What is not so obvious is the way that the assumptions of straw polling contradicted the structure of party politics. Public opinion was thought to be formed, expressed, and monitored by parties—by *groups* whose livelihood depended on understanding and shaping public opinion. Yet the straw poll was a technique for opinion assessment that assumed public opinion to be an aggregation of atomized, anonymous *individuals*. In other words, during the mid-19th century we begin to see a clash between commonly understood conceptions of public opinion as *party* opinion, and new methodologies that in many ways ignored groups altogether. For Bryce, de Tocqueville, and other observers of American politics of the period, groups were the key to understanding collective opinion. But the straw poll—based upon the notion of aggregating individuals to assess the popular sentiment—was also becoming a central means for understanding collective opinion.

PARTIES AND OPINION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

By the early 20th century, parties had lost considerable ground. While a decline in voter turnout after the turn of the century probably had many causes (e.g., shifting demographics of the electorate, and the rise of leisure activities), some historians attribute increasing alienation of voters to the inability of parties to motivate their constituencies. Even before the rise in split-ticket voting and the decline of partisan feeling in the mid-20th century, documented so well by Wattenberg (1986), citizens had already begun to lose interest in the sort of frantic participation that characterized the previous century. As McGerr (1986) puts it:

"Elections [of the early 20th century] lost their role as expressions of martial spirit, leisure, personal identity, communal life, and class theater" (p. 206). A shift to advertising and slick campaign management by the national parties obviated much of the local activity that drew men into politics. By the 1930s and 1940s, as I have argued elsewhere (Herbst, 1993), one no longer found citizens' straw polls in newspapers. Professional pollsters like *The Literary Digest*, Gallup, and Roper began to measure public sentiment before elections. Parties and the sorts of ritualized politics they promoted, had become superfluous in an increasingly professionalized and rationalized electoral sphere.

Although we are not accustomed to thinking about parties as "technologies" for public opinion expression and measurement, we certainly should, since they filled these critical functions up until the early decades of the 20th century. Yet after that period, polls "won out" over parties as the dominant means of expressing and assessing public opinion. Parties are still omnipresent in American electoral politics, as are interest groups. But we tend not to think of them as key purveyors of public opinion, since polling seems so much more reliable and scientific. In many ways, polls do seem to be the most appropriate means for public opinion expression and measurement in a mass society such as ours. Group-oriented meanings of public opinion seem almost naive in an environment where few people participate in local party activities, and many more are disgusted by the parties' lack of definition (see Miller & Traugott, 1989; on third parties and public opinion, see Herbst, 1994).

In his well-known critique of opinion polling, Herbert Blumer (1948) tried to revive the notion that one must study social groups in order to discern public opinion. He scolded survey researchers for ignoring social and political structure—the fact that some groups are more powerful than others, and will influence public policy regardless of what surveys indicate. Though it was never articulated in this fashion, Blumer's group-oriented definition of public opinion presided in the mid-19th century. By the time Blumer was able to launch his sociological analysis of public opinion, though, survey research was a thriving industry. Far too many people had far too much invested in the new business of polling to reconsider the meaning of public opinion. With parties on the decline, surveys seemed an excellent replacement: they conveyed public opinion in an efficient, seemingly objective manner—something the parties had not done, and might never be able to do.

Interestingly, poll results reported in today's major newspapers and popular magazines often focus on groups, despite the fact that the individual is the unit of analysis in survey research. Pollsters and journalists in the 20th century believe that statistical categories help readers to conceptualize opinion enclaves within the electorate. Often, pollsters break down their results, indicating how men versus women feel about a candidate, or whether approval of a particular policy is highest among blacks, whites, Hispanics, or Asians. One could argue that using such categories gives survey data the sort of texture Blumer asked for, since readers can note how class, race, ethnicity, gender, education, and other variables are correlated with public opinion.

I would argue that such categories, while potentially useful to policy makers and candidates, are problematic in several ways. For one, the practice implies that categories *are* social groups—that blacks, for example, are an organized, potentially active social and political entity. This is clearly not the case at all, however, since the African Americans polled in a typical national survey do not know each other and undoubtedly live in different neighborhoods or regions of the country. Second, and more importantly, the way pollsters categorize people does not necessary "map onto" the way members of the sample see themselves. For example, suppose a pollster supplies her client (a news organization) with a survey indicating popular attitudes toward law enforcement. The data are broken down into categories by race and income. Why those categories? Why not religion, gender, community-mindedness, political efficacy, alienation, or some other even more complex constellation of demographic or psychographic variables? This problem is especially troubling when pollsters collect opinion data about events that conflate several group affiliations at once. During the Clarence Thomas nomination hearings in 1991, for example, gender, race, class, education, and feminist ideology were all important factors in public discourse about the event. To break down poll data by race or gender seems a rather weak attempt at the sort of social group analysis Blumer argued for.[2]

All this is not to say that pollsters should not try to analyze their data more rigorously, or that they should abandon categorical analysis. I am simply using recent survey research practices to demonstrate how it is that the meaning of public opinion has changed over time, and that meanings of public opinion are always intertwined with measurement techniques. Behind every methodology is a philosophy of what public opinion actually is. During the 19th century, public opinion meant the activity of parties, although the acceleration of straw polling reflected gradual changes in that connotation. In contemporary American political discourse, the notion that the public is composed *not* of social groups but of atomized individuals, serves as the philosophy behind our dominant measurement technique. This philosophy may change, as it has so many times throughout the history of public opinion communica-

tion, and students of public expression should be attuned to these sorts of fundamental transformations in political culture.

NOTES

1. Polls are still used rhetorically during campaigns, of course. Yet the quality of 19th century polling rhetoric was far different than it is today. On polling rhetoric in 1992, see Sandra Bauman and Susan Herbst (1994).

2. Most pollsters would argue that they aren't attempting to engage in social group analysis, and that may be true. Yet, the way categorical data are discussed by journalists, policy makers, and others (after publication) does reify these groups, whether pollsters like it or not. Should polling professionals try to "correct" public discourse and rhetoric about groups, inspired by their categorical presentation of data? This is a question unaddressed by the industry, but important nonetheless.

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5

The Industry of Public Opinion

Peter V. Miller

> Tools are usually employed automatically, without a second thought. So a description of tools and how they are used should strike practitioners as an "of course" and a "so what?"—as true to life but unremarkable. Methodology, how these tools are used as tools, is just what everyone knows.
>
> —Martin Krieger, (1989)

> Never mind telling your children where babies come from; instead, give them news they can use, like where Public Opinion comes from.
>
> —William Safire, *The New York Times*

This chapter overviews the "public opinion industry"—commercial, governmental and academic organizations that produce knowledge of people's sentiment and behavior through polls or surveys. Previous literature on this subject is characterized by an odd duality. On the one hand, there is a voluminous body of knowledge on survey methodology, involving the minutiae of measurement theory, sampling, questionnaire design, data analysis and the like. This literature, in public opinion textbooks and in methodological texts and journals, speaks only indirectly about the industry; it is narrow, technical, and institutionally unreflective. The notion that public opinion information costs money and involves organizations that constitute an industry is only a subtext in these works.[1] In addressing questions about how the work of public