

The Importance of Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

While recent public opinion researchers have added few theoretical concepts which were not available at the time of the French Revolution, they have devised a set of instruments, the social impact of which has been substantial. Survey techniques can be, and have been, used at all stages of the decision-making process, and at all levels. They are a major contribution to self-observation, which in turn is an essential requirement for the fuller realization of the values of our democracy.

Keywords: Public opinion, democracy, French Revolution

INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty of the people, which is the very basis of democracy, really means supremacy of the public opinion. In every democracy, the government and its policies are continuously based on public opinion [1]. The government remains in power so long as it is backed by public opinion. Public opinion is the most effective instrument of control over the government. The government is really responsible to public opinion [2]. In every election only that political party wins which enjoys the support of public opinion [3]. The political party which gets the popular mandate to rule has to exercise power only in tune with public opinion. It has to go out of power when public opinion turns against it. The laws passed by the government are in-fact based upon public demands i.e. demands backed by public opinion [4]. Hence, public opinion is a source of law. Not only public opinion is a source of law but also it is an important sanction behind law [5]. Only those laws get successfully implemented and produce desired results, which are backed by public opinion. Rights and Freedom of the people need protection [6]. Public Opinion acts as their guardian. Alert public opinion is the greatest safeguard against any violation of rights and freedoms of the people. The government of the state formulates its policies on the basis of the public

opinion. All public policies are based on public opinion. The government is supposed to do everything which the public opinion demands [7]. A government backed by strong public opinion enjoys a high degree of credibility. It helps it to work effectively and strongly. No law aimed at social change, no policy aimed at social reforms and no action aimed at development can be really successful unless it is backed by strong public opinion. Desired objectives of social change can be secured only by securing a public opinion distinctly favourable to proposed reforms and changes [8]. As such in every society, public opinion is at the back of every activity of the government [9]. Realizing fully the importance of public opinion, J.S. Mill very strongly advocated the need for an absolutely free flow of public opinion in the society. He was certain that each opinion should be allowed to freely flow in the society as it is necessary for the emergency of a true public opinion. Laski was of the view that even during a period of war, freedom of public opinion should not be suppressed [10]. In case an opinion is backed by the people at large and it opposes war, the state has no right to continue the war, and in case the opinion is the opinion of only a minority, it cannot in any way adversely affect the outcome of war. Public opinion can be

defined as a sum of all the views held by the public on a particular issue at a

particular time [11].

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC OPINION IMPORTANCE

A guide to government Public opinion helps the government when it is formulating policies for implementation so that it can meet the expectations of the people. In that sense, public opinion

helps the government of the day to determine the wishes of the people and what they think about its policies and actions [4].

Encourages public participation

As the people express their opinion on issues of national importance, they are, at the same time, participating indirectly in the governance of their country. These views, expressed by the public on issues

of public interest helps the government in the sense that, where a policy does not inure to the benefit of the people, it can be changed to meet their expectations [5].

Measures Government Performance

Public opinion can be used to determine how well a government has performed. In a democratic country, periodic elections are used to measure how well a government has done during a mandated

term of office. However, in between, elections can no longer be used. People rely on public opinion polls to judge government performance [6].

Shapes Government's Image

Public opinion can also be used to determine whether a government is democratic or not. In a democratic system, governments create the platform

for the populace to express their opinions on issues. The absence of this is proof that the government is not democratic [7].

Accountability of Government`

Public opinion is a useful tool in making government responsible to the electorates. The people can demand from the government to account for its

activities in power. These demands are expressed through the opinions of the people to compel governments to be accountable [8].

Educates the public

One of the functions of the mass media - TV, newspaper, and radio - is to educate their audience and readers. As opinions are expressed on various issues at these

various media outlets, the listeners, viewers, and readers get educated government policy directions and programmes to develop the country [9].

HISTORY

The emergence of public opinion as a significant force in the political realm can be dated to the late 17th century; however, opinion had been regarded as having singular importance since far earlier.

queen of the world". In his treatise, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding c, John Locke considered that man was subject to three laws: the divine law, the civil law and most importantly in Locke's judgement, the law of opinion or reputation. He regarded the latter as of the highest importance because dislike and ill opinion force people to conform in their behaviour to social norms, however he didn't consider public opinion as a suitable influence for

Medieval famapublica or voxetfamacommunis had great legal and social importance from the 12th and 13th centuries onward. Later, William Shakespeare called public opinion the "mistress of success" and Blaise Pascal thought it was "the

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In his 1672 essay *On the Original and Nature of Government*, William Temple gave an early formulation of the importance of public opinion. He observed that "when vast numbers of men submit their lives and fortunes absolutely to the will of one, it must be force of custom, or opinion which subjects power to authority". Temple disagreed with the prevalent opinion that the basis of government lay in a social contract and thought that government was merely allowed to exist due to the favour of public opinion. The prerequisites for the emergence of a public sphere were increasing levels of literacy which was spurred on by the Reformation, which encouraged individuals to read the Bible in the vernacular, and the rapidly expanding printing presses. During the 18th century religious literature was replaced with secular literature, novels and pamphlets. In parallel to this was the growth in reading societies and clubs. At the turn of the century the first circulating library opened in London and the public library became widespread and available to the public [10].

An institution of central importance in the development of public opinion, was the coffee-house, which became widespread throughout Europe in the mid-17th century. Although Charles II later tried to suppress the London coffeehouses as "places where the

Gentlemen's clubs proliferated in the 18th century, especially in the West End of London. Clubs took over the role occupied by coffee houses in 18th century London to some degree and reached the height of their influence in the late 19th century. Some notable names were White's, Brooks's, Arthur's and Boodle's which still exist today. These social changes, in which a closed and largely illiterate public became an open and politicized one, was to become of tremendous political importance in the

disaffected met, and spread scandalous reports concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers", the public flocked to them. For several decades following the Restoration, the Wits gathered round John Dryden at Will's Coffee House in Russell Street, Covent Garden. The coffee houses were great social levellers, open to all men and indifferent to social status, and as a result associated with equality and republicanism [11]. More generally, coffee houses became meeting places where business could be carried on, news exchanged and The London Gazette (government announcements) read. Lloyd's of London had its origins in a coffeehouse run by Edward Lloyd, where underwriters of ship insurance met to do business. By 1739, there were 551 coffeehouses in London. Each attracted a particular clientele divided by occupation or attitude, such as Tories and Whigs, wits and stockjobbers, merchants and lawyers, booksellers and authors, men of fashion or the "cits" of the old city center. Joseph Addison wanted to have it said of him that he had "brought philosophy out of closets and libraries to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea tables and in coffee houses". According to one French visitor, Antoine François Prévost, coffeehouses, "where you have the right to read all the papers for and against the government", were the "seats of English liberty" [4].

Gentleman clubs

19th century as the mass media was circulated ever more widely and literacy was steadily improved. Governments increasingly recognized the importance of managing and directing public opinion. This trend is exemplified in the career of George Canning who restyled his political career from its aristocratic origins to one of popular consent when he contested and won the parliamentary seat in Liverpool, a city with a growing and affluent middle class which he attributed to the growing influence of "public

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opinion". Jeremy Bentham was an impassioned advocate of the importance of public opinion in the shaping of constitutional governance. He thought it important that all government acts and decisions should be subject to the inspection of public opinion, because "to the pernicious exercise of the power of

How social movements have changed public opinion

From the feminism movement of the 1960s to Black Lives Matter, social movements have left a mark on the history of public opinion. Movements have shifted not only the government opinion of what should be changed but also help raise the awareness of focal issues that groups of people struggle with. There are several reasons why social movement can start. These include discrimination, the government's actions in an improper manner, environmental concerns, and loss of freedoms. Before a social movement can build widespread popular support, it must generate awareness among the general public. Failing to do so may mean the focal issues a movement advocates for go unnoticed or remain minor concerns. Political scientists Matthew Feinberg, Robb Miller, and Chloe Kovacheff published in their article titled "The Activist's Dilemma: Extreme Protests Actions Reduce Popular Support for Social Movements" state that gaining awareness of is the first step of a social movement. Social movements seek publicity through media coverage and research finds that media coverage is greater for events that are novel, dramatic, and sensational [3].

Feinberg et al. explain how there are many different ways a social movement can communicate what it desires to be changed. The article argues that social movements can change based on their protest techniques and those techniques can help them gain popular support. Activists have to grapple with how to communicate their agenda daily. This is called the activist dilemma. The two types of techniques the article discusses are moderate and extreme techniques. Extreme techniques are any protest tactics that are violent. For

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government it is the only check" He opined that public opinion had the power to ensure that rulers would rule for the greatest happiness of the greater number. He brought in Utilitarian philosophy in order to define theories of public opinion [7].

example, animal rights groups breaking into an animal testing lab and releasing all the animals. Continuing with this example, a moderate technique would be them standing in front of the lab protesting. Moderate techniques are them intentionally showing the public that they protest this organization without the use of violence. Depending on how extreme the techniques are, the public can sometimes get scared by the protestors and the movement cannot gain popular support will spend the next part of this article explaining how the Second Wave of Feminism gained awareness and widespread support [5].

The Second Wave of Feminism began in 1963 with Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan discusses sexism that lays within women's place in society. During this time, women were seen only working in the home and should love doing it as opposed to men being able to work outside of the home. Many of the housewives of this generation fought to erase sexual discrimination from employment. Constance Grady, a journalist from *Vox* writes about the legislation that was influenced and achieved because of the Second Wave of Feminism. "The Equal Pay Act of 1963 theoretically outlawed the gender pay gap; a series of landmark Supreme Court cases through the '60s and '70s gave married and unmarried women the right to use birth control; Title IX gave women the right to educational equality; and in 1973, *Roe v. Wade* guaranteed women reproductive freedom" In this example, Friedan's text made American women of the 1960s aware of the sexual

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discrimination they were facing. This made the public aware of the discrimination they were experiencing. This awareness caught the government's attention and influenced the legislative bills above [6].

Another way social movements can influence public opinion is through legal framing. Legal framing is a way of analyzing the influences of how laws are written. An example of this can be shown here: "The National Organization for Women (NOW). Unlike its predecessors, NOW rejected all sex-specific employment classifications and was ideologically committed to a full-blown equal treatment standard for women in the workplace. NOW's immediate political identity centered on the destruction of gender-specific legal categories, including those that for decades had required and legitimated protective labor policies exclusively for women. And just a few years later, protective laws for women were legally invalidated, never to return" NOW influenced legislators to make changes in the sexual discrimination policy. This, in turn, makes the public more aware of these issues and influences changes at the government and institutional levels [5].

#BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement is a social movement that has recently influenced public opinion. Dewey M. Clayton compares the success of the Black Lives Matter movement to the success of the civil rights movement. Clayton explains here how BLM has reached its goal of allowing Americans to understand the patterns of systematic racism in the United States. Clayton writes "From protests in every major city to being mentioned in television series such as Law and Order, Black Lives Matter has "pierced a big hole in the ideology of a post-racial America and exposed the deep and persistent patterns of racism in the United State" You can see here that social movements techniques do not stay consistent. This is a strength of social

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movements. They have evolved with the changing times by spreading their message across public media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and even television shows. Thereby, continuing to adapt to people's concerns of modern-day and technological advances. This makes the issues of the movement more noticeable and the government more willing to change their policies to address the concerns of the movement. While BLM has influenced little legislative action its tactics have shown how American systems produce systematic racism [5].

Social movements can influence public opinion in many different ways. They can make the public aware of the issue that others suffer from. When the public is aware of the issue the government becomes aware of them leading to changes in legal framing and protests techniques. It is important that the public learns about social movements because it shows how the struggles of your ancestors have led to our democracy we have today [7].

If strategists can use a single Supreme Court decision to bring about major political change, it would seem that the media-whether through political programs or campaign advertisements-too could influence the public's opinion of candidates. Surely, most Americans think as much, and it is hard to blame them given the enormous amounts of money spent on campaigns, the ubiquitous ads on television and elsewhere, and the emergence of a profession devoted to electing candidates. But they are wrong. At least when it comes to the direct effect of the media on voters' decisions, social scientists have called the impact "marginal at most," as Diana Mutz writes in her essay [8].

Explaining the gap between public perceptions and reality, as well as assessing its implications, is no small task. Mutz, director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics at the University of Pennsylvania, is more than

up to confronting the challenge. For decades now, Mutz has provided both scholars and the public with crucial insights into public opinion and political communication. Her essay here is no exception. Mutz begins by taking us through the history of the divide between

the public and the experts on the media's influence. This makes for a fascinating read, but Mutz's goal is not solely descriptive. She argues powerfully that Americans are not "well served by [their] extreme beliefs in media power [9].

Characteristics of Public Opinion:

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(i) Public opinion is concerned with a matter of public importance. It is not concerned with the interests of a particular group of people.

(ii) Public opinion is for social welfare. The welfare of society is an essential characteristic of public opinion.

(iii) Public opinion is arrived at after careful thought. It is the tentative deliberative adjustment of public to a situation. It is a logical view of things. While Lasswell holds that all opinions involve a choice between different views which may be rationally held, Kimball Young, on the other hand, is of the view that an opinion may be rational, or based upon some conviction, or it may proceed from feeling and emotion.

(iv) It is cooperative product. It is the product of interaction of human minds.

ADVERTISEMENTS:(v) Public opinion is related to a particular age or times. It is to be evaluated in the context of a particular situation.(vi) Public opinion has a cultural base. The culture of a society influences public opinion.(vii) Lastly, numbers are not necessary to constitute public opinion. The opinion of even a single person may be called public opinion though not held by the majority. The opinion of Mahatma Gandhi, though held by him alone, could be rightly called public opinion. However, the opinion held by a minority must be shared by the majority not by force but by conviction. The majority while not actually holding it must be convinced that it is for

the social good. As one writer puts it, "A majority is not enough and unanimity is not required but the opinion must be such that while the minority may not share it, they feel bound by conviction not by fear, to accept it." From the behaviouristic point of view the question of unanimity or majority consent is of no immediate importance in defining public opinion.

ADVERTISEMENTS:So public opinion may be defined as the opinion of the people held by them on any issue for the welfare of the whole community. It is a collective product. It is an opinion in which the public finds itself for any reason constrained to acquiesce. It is composite opinion, a sort of synthetic average formed out of all the different opinions actually held by the public. It grows out of the interaction of various shades in the position of pros and cons. Bryce says, Some currents develop more strength than others, because they have behind them large numbers or more intensity of conviction, and when one is evidently the strongest, it begins to be called public opinion par excellence being taken to embody the views supposed to be held by the bulk of the people. It is, as Ginsberg puts it, "a co-operative product." Being a co-operative product, "it does represent the entire public as it is being mobilized to act on the issue....public opinion is always moving towards a decision even though it never is unanimous."

CONCLUSION

Wherever we probe in our study of public opinion and foreign policy, we encounter frustrating complexities and ambiguities. Political theorists and historians disagree about the ways the public ought to influence foreign policy and the dimensions of the actual nature of the

relationship in American history. Most contend that presidents are somehow constrained by a public that defines broad national goals and sets parameters for action. Yet the presidents' preeminence in the opinion-making process guarantees them almost as much freedom in the

international arena as leaders from less democratic systems. The public itself is not monolithic. Several publics possess varying degrees of knowledge of, interest in, and influence on foreign policy. Individuals develop foreign policy attitudes because of exposure to events and as a result of socioeconomic status and personality development. The wealth of sophisticated research produced by social scientists since World War II underscores the gaps in knowledge about the opinion-policy relationship. Although we know much more about the origins of foreign policy attitudes, as well as the

world of the decision maker, the precise nature of the opinion-policy nexus still eludes us. Because of the questions raised about the meaning of the Vietnam experience for the American democratic system, scholars and statesmen began reexamining the public's impact on foreign policy. As might have been expected, considering the earlier debates over this complicated and contentious issue during the life of the republic, they have failed to reach a clear consensus on this most important and often troubling aspect of their unique political system.

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