

What is public opinion?

Where do people get public opinion?

Socialization

Personal Experience/Self-interest

Education

Reference Groups

Media

What is latent public opinion?

Characteristics of Public Opinion: PEOPLE ARE FICKLE!

1) Uninformed

People's policy preferences change when they are informed (spending on schools)

People like education, assume we're not spending enough, opposite to foreign aid

People don't know first amendment freedoms

Why?

Vote doesn't matter much

Prefer entertainment

Disinterested

Incapable of changing

2) Inconsistent

When questions asked differently, different answers: Spending too much? Yes!

On energy? No. On health? No. etc etc

3) Non-ideological

Only "Elites" are thought to be ideological

Liberal and Conservative aren't really understood

4) Moderate

(Self-reported)

Why public opinion?

- 1) May change for individuals but stable in the aggregate
 - Francis Galton**, Vox Populi 1907
 - Aristotle** Politics 4th century BCE
- 2) Also necessary for democracy, maybe.
- 3) Compete with interest groups

3 types of surveys:

- 1) Time-series
- 2) Cross-sectional (most public opinion): cheap and broad (Gallup etc)
- 3) Panel (some public opinion): expensive but more informative (NAES etc)

Sampling Error

The sample isn't exactly the same as the population

Selection Bias

Focus Groups are intentionally biased samples

Measurement Error: PEOPLE ARE FICKLE!!!

Confusing (holocaust), Leading (welfare vs assistance to poor), Simple (abortion nuanced)

Question TL:DR

Why might it be problematic if I polled this section about who they think will win the Republican primary nomination?

Exercise:

Please break up into groups of 3 to 5. Imagine you are designing a cross-sectional survey and you have been instructed to assess public opinion on one of the biggest social issues of today. Select a current hot-button issue and design a question with the intention of getting some piece of information from the public concerning what they think about this issue. Make sure you are clear in what information you want to collect, then design your question around the acquisition of that information. A group member will write your question on the board, then we will discuss it.

Discussion Questions

Despite all its flaws, is public opinion still a valuable commodity?

Discuss the ways in which polling is both good and bad for democracy. Is it a net gain or loss?

How might researchers or government officials nullify some of the problems with public opinion? Are they good enough?

How responsible are elected representatives for listening to and voting in line with public opinion? Do they?

Gallup makes a case for the government staying out of public polling, as it stays out of the media, but this isn't strictly true. The government provides public broadcasting such as PBS, NPR and CSPAN. Discuss the pros and cons of the government conducting public polling compared to private companies.