

Public Opinion Between Elections

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This paper is the Presidential Address which was delivered before the Twelfth Annual Conference on Public Opinion Research in Washington, D. C. during May, 1957. In it the author suggests some concepts which he believes may help us understand how people exert power in a representative democracy.

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BECAUSE I HAVE spent most of my professional life in industry, I have been appropriately disciplined against using technical language and indulging in theoretical excursions. But on this occasion, I shall throw caution to the winds and propose a number of theoretical formulations with only the most sketchy data to support them. Without further preliminaries, I suggest that a word seldom used in our profession should find a prominent place in our jargon.

The word is *fungible*. It is a common word among lawyers and economists, and refers to the quality of being interchangeable. Dollar bills are fungible; one is as good as another. Peas in a pod and apples in a barrel are fungible to a grocer—and to market and opinion researchers, once a sample is drawn, *respondents* are fungible. There is good reason why this is so. As long as the behavior being studied culminates in symbolic acts which are fungible, respondents are appropriately considered to be fungible. Thus, in election studies, the behavior being studied culminates in an X on a ballot, and X's on ballots are fungible. It doesn't matter whether the mayor or the town drunk was on the other end of the pencil. The law decrees that one X is worth as much as any other X.

In most market research, the culminating act being studied is the exchange of money for goods. And money is fungible. One customer is, by and large, as good as another. Studies where style leadership or prestige play an important role are partial exceptions to the rule. But even in these instances, all members of large demographic sub-groups are customarily treated as fungible. Thus for example, members of the A economic group are often regarded as fungible when prestige is an important factor.

There is a paradox in our society; namely, that we place high value on individual enterprise and, at the same time, we pay high deference to the myth of simple equality. By simple equality, I do not refer to the right to equality before the law or the right to equal opportunity. I refer to the simple myth that everyone is equal. We take great pride in unusual individual achievement, but we also favor such phrases as "I think I'm average," or

"Of course, I'm no different from the next guy," or "Who does he think he is?"; all of which postulate simple equality as the right way for things to be. This theme of simple equality in our national mythology comes very close to praising the idea of human beings as fungible. In fact, that is the literal meaning of the self-laudatory phrase, "Of course, I'm no different from the next guy." One might as well say, "Of course, I'm fungible."

It is hardly surprising then that our society, which leads the world in mass production, mass distribution, and modal standard of living, also leads in the application of random sampling techniques among the public. We come by it honestly, and we can take appropriate pride in the degree of scientific accuracy that we regularly achieve in measuring those aspects of life that culminate in fungible behavior, such as buying, or selling, or voting.

NON-FUNGIBLE POLITICAL DECISIONS

The challenge now is to move on toward comparable scientific stature in fields where fungible ballots or fungible dollars do not underwrite our methodology with its assumption of simply equality. We know a great deal about sampling people, but we know very little about sampling power. At this point, therefore, we leave the idea of fungibility. It has served to identify the part of public opinion research in which most progress has been made. I invite your attention now to the impact of public opinion on the ultimate decision makers when political decisions are not determined at the polls.

Consider our tenuous position regarding political events. When we do a pre-election survey, where the crucial acts of citizens are fungible, that is, where the issue is finally decided by voting, we can report our survey findings in the role of public opinion scientist. We can say, "Dismiss these findings at your peril for they closely approximate what is going to happen." But on other political issues where the crucial acts of citizens are not fungible, on issues where the decision does not turn on a count of votes, we must adopt quite a different posture: We say, "Here is what we found. We don't claim that this approximates or even ought to approximate how things will balance out, or what will finally happen, but we thought you might be interested in what people said."

There are unnumbered instances where public opinion said Yes, but the decision was No; where public opinion said No, but the decision was Yes. Of course, there are also instances where the decision happened to conform with public opinion. When political issues are not decided at the polls, however, our stature decreases from scientist to purveyor of incidental information, because our methodology does not include even a set of hypotheses regarding the dynamics of public opinion in political decision making, when the effective force of that opinion is registered in other than fungible form.

In this area, we must bow to the practical politician, for although he usually cannot articulate his principles of operation and although he often takes off by intuition and flies by the seat of his pants, he can estimate, by and large better than we can, what is going to happen.

In a society that presumably leads the world in its responsiveness to the will of the people, here surely is a challenging frontier for public opinion researchers. Stated briefly, the question is this: What principles provide a basis for estimating the power of public opinion in political decisions that are not decided at the polls? I want to discuss two concepts that seem to me to be important if we are to come to grips with this problem. I will refer to these concepts as Rebound and Reception.

REBOUND

Rebound has to do primarily with the public, the rank and file, the people at large. There are three interacting factors in Rebound: 1) the issue, 2) latent opinion, and 3) manifest power. The *issue* is simply the subject for discussion. The *latent opinion* is how people see the issue and how strongly they feel about it. The *manifest power* is the degree to which latent opinion flows into action which has an impact on those who must decide. Let me illustrate with a story about the family next door. The *issue* was whether the four children should eat spinach. The *latent opinion*, consisting of how the children saw the issue and how strongly they felt about it, was as follows. They perceived eating spinach not as a matter of balanced nutrition, but as an unappetizing consequence of their father's vanity regarding his vegetable garden. This feeling was unanimous, substantial, and frequently expressed among the children. But note, at this stage, that the opinion is latent and of little consequence. This latent opinion became *manifest power* when the children called a family meeting where each one presented father with a signed pledge to work in the garden an hour a week if they could begin by pulling up the spinach along with the weeds. The story stops there for the moment. It has served to illustrate rebound which consists of the issue, latent opinion and manifest power.

In our national life, we hear much talk about big issues and little issues. The apparent size of an issue may be quite different from its practical size. For example, the denial of civil rights to a citizen would appear to be of infinitely greater importance than what is to be done about the squirrels on the White House lawn. But the latter may generate more rebound; that is, more felt force from the public. For better or for worse, the significance of an issue to the public often lies less in its objective subject matter than in its impact on the needs and values of the people. The latent opinion on an issue, consequently, may be surprisingly removed from the apparent subject matter under discussion.

Thus some people, I among them, thought that the Army-McCarthy hearings would be rather generally perceived as a crucial test of several basic Constitutional principles. We were wrong. A small sample study of mine,¹ taken together with Stouffer's study² and the findings of Gallup polls, suggests that the public perceived the issue differently. The more general perception, if you will permit a composite summary and only approximate statistics, was something like this. Some 45 per cent of the public perceived the hearings as a contest between decent men and a ruffian. Those who saw it that way cheered for the decent men. Another group, in the neighborhood of 33 per cent saw the issue as a contest between sob sisters and a righteous crusader, and they rooted for righteousness. In order that our percentages add to 100, we can add that some 20 per cent just couldn't be bothered, and an odd two or three per cent perplexed their neighbors by shouting about abstract principles.

Such values as good manners in face-to-face relationships and such needs as justice spiked with sadism work their alchemy on issues. The perceptual processes among the public are no less marvelous than the transformations worked by nuclear physicists and, in both cases, one is well advised not to expect a one-to-one conformity between the nature and potency of what went in and what comes out.

Once we understand the way the Army-McCarthy hearings were rather generally perceived, the findings of a recent Roper survey are not surprising. A human interest drama, even a very intense one, is after all a transitory thing. The Roper figures, published recently, show that currently 64 per cent of the public are neutral or have no opinion regarding Senator McCarthy and what he stood for. Sixteen per cent are favorable and 20 per cent are unfavorable. This survey was done in January 1957 and was published before the untimely death of Senator McCarthy.

We have only vague notions of the latent opinion that an issue will generate. A few months ago, a reporter queried the President about plans for a helicopter to transport him to and from the golf course. The President sharply denied any such plans. Now, suppose for a moment that the President had said that in order to save time, not break speed laws, and get the amount and kind of exercise recommended by his physicians, he did plan to go to and from the golf course by helicopter. What kind of latent opinion would this have generated among the public? I doubt whether we could even agree on whether it would be mostly favorable or mostly unfavorable. How strong is resentment of special privilege? How strong, on the other

¹ "Social Values and the Ego-Ideal," scheduled for publication in the *Yearbook of Psychology and the Social Sciences*, New York: International Universities Press, 1958.

² Samuel Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1955.

hand, are indulgent impulses toward preserving the President's health? Would this item of expense have been regarded as a cynical inconsistency since he was then urging reductions in the national budget? Or would it have been regarded as evidence of efficiency in budgeting valuable time? And in fact more basic than all of these is another question: Would the public have perceived the issue in terms of any of these values, or would some quite different considerations have turned out to be more important as resonators of this issue among the public?

We ought to be able to learn enough about functioning values, folklore, trigger points, loves, hates, and prejudices so that we could estimate how the public will resonate an issue. If we could do so, we would have come to grips with what I have referred to as the *latent* opinion.

The third factor in rebound is manifest power. This would include the study of overt behavior expressing the latent opinion and the social mechanisms, the institutions, the lobbies, the pressure groups, and the channels through which these behaviors become tangible to the decision makers. Some solid progress is already available in studies, for example, of reference groups and opinion leadership. A review by Elihu Katz, in the current anniversary issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, summarizes some of this work. But by far the bulk of available research is limited to that relatively narrow space between individuals and their neighborhood polling places, or between individuals and their retail stores. That is, our knowledge is largely confined to the kinds of latent opinion that become manifest power in fungible form. The processes by which the expressed will of millions regarding political issues may be damped into irrelevance, or may seep up, or may accumulate into undeniable urgency are not understood in anything like systematic fashion.

RECEPTION

We come now to the second concept, *Reception*. If I may return for a moment to the family next door, you will remember that latent opinion became manifest power in the form of signed pledges presented in person by the children to their father, on the occasion of a family meeting. At that point, the process of rebound was complete. But no decision had been reached. I can tell you now that the *reception* by the decision makers, in this instance, was favorable. The parents adjusted their interests in deference to the manifest power of public opinion. *By reception I refer to the disposition of decision makers toward implementing manifest power on a given issue.*

Officials, journalists, and even social scientists sometimes talk as if public opinion were irresistible—we read that “Public opinion demanded. . . ,” or we hear that “The will of the majority could not be denied,” etc., etc.

Again, except when the law dictates compliance with the will of the public as expressed in the fungible terms of an election, this simply is not true. During the past decade polls have repeatedly shown substantial majorities favoring statehood for Hawaii and Alaska, but they are not states.

The separate and considerable power of the legislative body is a fact of life in our representative democracy, and the dynamics of the reception accorded manifest power must be explored before we can hope to understand the impact of public opinion on decision making between elections. I believe that we have both perceptive insights and a scientific frame of reference from which to launch such studies: a current example of the former is William S. White's book, *The Citadel*, and the scientific frame of reference is provided by the psychology of peer groups.

Legislative groups have repeatedly been referred to, both by their own members and by perceptive observers, as clubs. It is strange that this bit of colloquial wisdom has not attracted more attention from social scientists. There is a characteristic pattern of ethics, values, relationships, and behavior that seems to emerge spontaneously in a peer group in our society. These patterns have been most intensively studied among youth—in their clubs, cliques, or friendship groups.

I will mention only a few parallels between boys' clubs and legislative groups, and I humbly apologize to members of both kinds of peer groups for the invidious comparisons.

1. Members of both groups bring prior loyalties to their peer group membership. Boys bring prior loyalties to their families, legislators to their constituencies. But while functioning as groups, these prior loyalties tend to recede and peer group loyalties tend to dominate. Still there is always the knowledge that after the club meeting, members must go home and their conduct must have been such that they can get permission to come back for the next meeting.

If I may pause for an aside here, note that peer group loyalty tends to raise the sights of men elected to Congress so that they tend to think more nationally, less provincially than formerly. On the other hand, considered from the international point of view, this same peer group loyalty at the national level tends to preserve what might be called national provincialism. But now we return to our parallels between boys' clubs and legislators.

2. Peer groups tend to build up their own systems of ethics, ceremonies, customs, and procedures. The fact that these ways of behaving often appear to outsiders to be odd, inefficient, quaint, or irrational makes very little difference to the members. They observe and guard them with jealous devotion.

3. New members undergo a probationary period during which they are initiated into the rituals of peer group ethics and procedures, and during

which their junior status is made clearly apparent. Be they ever so exclusive, peer groups have their own internal social hierarchies.

4. Animosities and competitiveness commonly occur within the group, but a threat from the outside will usually bring a truce within, and a united stand against outside criticism. An attack on a member is perceived as an attack on the group.

5. The group is tolerant, sometimes remarkably tolerant, of a member who does not conform to outside ethics and folkways, but it disciplines violations of its own group ethics with rigid severity.

Each of you could extend the list, but even these few examples make it apparent that the power of public opinion does not make its impact on a passive, quiescent receptacle. It isn't at all like tossing an apple into a basket. A legislative group is itself an intricate, animated social organism. It has its own internal ethics, obligations, customs, taboos, rituals, punishments, honors, intentions, and orientation. It is upon this kind of self-contained, functioning social organism that public opinion must make its impact.

Just as an issue may be transformed in the perceptive processes of the public, so the same issue may be transformed in quite a different way within the legislative peer group. Thus, for purposes of illustration, we may speculate that statehood for Alaska and Hawaii might be transformed by the majority of the public into a matter of ordinary fairness: "The land belongs to this country, the people fight in our armed forces—if they want to be states, why fair is fair." Within the legislative peer group, the same issue, if statehood were to be granted, might mean additional club members with consequent changes in the balance of power, or it might mean competitive disadvantage for the constituents of certain members. And perhaps because such considerations as these weigh heavy within the peer group, but would not be easily understood by the public, the issue can be reshaped in quite a different form so as to resonate something less altruistic than "fair is fair" among the public.

The illustration need not be extended. The point is that public opinion does not function in decision making until it has been balanced off against peer group considerations or, stated differently, the power of the rebound on an issue is increased, sustained, reduced, or decimated depending on how it articulates with the climate in the peer group regarding that issue. The effective influence of public opinion then is rebound plus or minus reception.

SUMMARY

Public opinion research has achieved the status of a science in those areas where the practical force of public opinion has its impact in fungible form.

Where it has its practical force in non-fungible terms, we have made less progress.

I have proposed that in coping with the problems in this latter area, two concepts are basic—namely, the rebound and the reception. The difficulties of studying rebound and reception are of course formidable. Such factors as talent, inspiration, leadership, enthusiasm, personal, social and business relationships, not to mention sheer coincidence, complicate the study of both concepts. Granting that we can see only a little way ahead, I suggest that the concepts of rebound and reception lead us toward improving our understanding of how people exert power in this representative democracy.