

38 Public Opinion

What is public opinion? Public opinion is not easily defined. One might think of it as “all of the opinions that everyone has on politically relevant subjects.” But in that case, it is too vast to be known or to have any effect on public life. Some have even denied there is a single force known as “public opinion.” In today’s democracies, however, public opinion as a force in public life tends to be what the public thinks about a specific issue or set of issues at a particular time as measured by public opinion polls.

- **The role of public opinion in democracy** It is generally conceded that public opinion ought to play a part in democracy. After all, if citizens are to play a substantial role in government, what they think must be considered significant by legislators and executive branch decision-makers. Even so, for well over 2,000 years, critics of democracy, beginning in ancient Greece, have noted problems with public opinion.
- **Advantages and benefits of public opinion**
 - ▶ Public opinion serves as an indicator of matters of concern to the public and helps to increase awareness of specific policy issues that the public believes government should address.
 - ▶ Public opinion constitutes a measure of citizens’ satisfaction with government policy and the performance of elected officials.
 - ▶ Public opinion is a means of assessing citizen preferences for various policy proposals and thus can help guide elected officials in their choice of policy alternatives.
 - ▶ Public opinion provides elected officials with a means of determining the views of the people they seek to represent.
 - ▶ In parliamentary systems, public opinion is sometimes used by governments in power to make decisions about the timing of legislative elections; that is, governments call elections when they believe they will stand the greatest chance of winning.
- **Problems and dangers of public opinion**
 - ▶ Many or even most people may be uninformed about issues when they express opinions on them.
 - ▶ The public as a whole may not be well informed on all of the vast number of the issues faced by government. It may be argued it would be dangerous if uninformed public opinion guided legislators and policymakers.
 - ▶ Public opinion can be manipulated through skillful campaigns using the mass communications media, including negative and deceptive political advertising.
 - ▶ What is called “public opinion” may be shaped by public opinion surveys which are biased in one way or another, for example in what questions are and are not asked and how questions are phrased.

- **Critics of the influence of public opinion** Since public opinion can be uninformed or manipulated, critics have been suspicious of its influence.
 - ▶ According to some critics, opinion polls should be used cautiously and must be critically assessed.
 - ▶ A number of critics have suggested that “public opinion” not only states what people *do* think, but may also suggest to them what they *ought* to think. Publication of public opinion surveys may have the effect of unduly influencing those whose views are not fully formed.
 - ▶ A further criticism is that public opinion in democracies may constitute an oppressive force. On this view, individuals can feel helpless when confronted with, and are psychologically overwhelmed by, public opinion. Thus public opinion may be an irresistible weapon in what amounts to a “tyranny of the majority.”
 - ▶ Critics also point out that public opinion is subject to rapid change—that it is “fickle.” For that reason, they argue, its influence in a democracy is problematic.

Remedies for the dangers of public opinion

- **Instant judgment versus considered opinion: “public opinion” and “public judgment”** Because of the problematic character of public opinion and its influence in a democracy, students of the subject have attempted to reformulate the idea of public opinion.
 - ▶ Uninformed and unconsidered opinion can be distinguished from views that have been the subject of investigation, thought, and deliberation with others.
 - ▶ The results of such a process may be called “considered opinion” or “public judgment” to distinguish it from opinion that has not been subjected to this process.
- **Multiple sources of information: public opinion and the mass media** If citizens gather information from a variety of reliable, high quality sources, their opinions are more likely to be well informed and therefore wiser. These sources include a variety of newspapers, magazines, and journals, as well as radio, television, and the Internet.
 - ▶ Because the visual immediacy of television gives it special power to influence their opinion, citizens should be sure to derive information and opinion from a variety of sources.
 - ▶ Citizens should also be aware of the ways in which information and opinion can be mixed together and be able to distinguish between them.
 - ▶ Attention must also be drawn to the problem of the existence and spread of misinformation by the Internet. A great deal of false or misleading “information” is found on the Internet. The fact that certain claims are found on multiple sites on the Internet, does not of itself verify their validity.

- **Multiple associations** Individuals are less likely to be “captured” by a single point of view if they belong to a number of civic society groups.
- **Critical reasoning about public opinion polls** Citizens should think critically about the methodology and findings of public opinion polls. For example, citizens should consider:
 - ▶ What questions are or are not asked and whether they are neutrally worded.
 - ▶ Whether a sufficiently large sample was used to arrive at an accurate reading and whether scientific sampling was used to choose those questioned.
 - ▶ Whether the conclusions drawn from a poll are supported by the statistical results.
- **Need for critical judgment** If they are not to be accidentally or deliberately misled, citizens must learn to make critical judgments regarding sources of information and factual claims found in *all* of the mass media—print and electronic alike. Citizens are well advised both to think for themselves and to discuss issues with others in forming their views on public matters.
- **The mass media, public opinion, and democracy** Because of the power of the mass media to shape public opinion, it is impossible to have a healthy democracy without multiple sources of freely expressed editorial opinion, especially sources critical of the government in power, in *every principal category of the media*. Where governments or their allies have a monopoly or near monopoly on television and radio, democracy is difficult or impossible.
 - ▶ Those who read and are influenced by the various media of communication should know that newspapers, radio and television stations, other print media, as well as the Internet, may be the tools of special interests and are capable of misleading the public.
 - ▶ For this reason, a critical and skeptical eye is an essential tool of democratic citizenship.

What do you think?

- 1 What should be the role of public opinion in a democracy?
- 2 What are some of the dangers that public opinion might pose for democracy?
- 3 What can citizens do to lessen the dangers of public opinion?
- 4 How does the existence of public opinion help to fulfill the basic idea of democracy, the rule by the people?
- 5 What are the strengths and weaknesses of government following public opinion?
- 6 What is the relationship between public opinion and the media of mass communications?