Components of public opinion: attitudes and values

How many people actually form opinions on a given issue, as well as what sorts of opinions they form, depends partly on their immediate situations, partly on more-general social-environmental factors, and partly on their preexisting knowledge, attitudes, and values. Because attitudes and values play such a crucial role in the development of public opinion, scholars of the subject are naturally interested in the nature of these phenomena, as well as in ways to assess their variability and intensity.

The concepts of opinion, attitude, and value used in public opinion research were given an influential metaphorical characterization by the American-born political analyst Robert Worcester, who founded the London-based polling firm MORI (Market & Opinion Research International Ltd.). Values, he suggested, are “the deep tides of public mood, slow to change, but powerful.” Opinions, in contrast, are “the ripples on the surface of the public’s consciousness—shallow and easily changed.” Finally, attitudes are “the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger,” representing a midrange between values and opinions. According to Worcester, the art of understanding public opinion rests not only on the measurement of people’s views but also on understanding the motivations behind those views.

No matter how strongly they are held, attitudes are subject to change if the individual holding them learns of new facts or perspectives that challenge his or her earlier thinking. This is especially likely when people learn of a contrary position held by an individual whose judgment they respect. This course of influence, known as “opinion leadership,” is frequently utilized by publicists as a means of inducing people to reconsider—and quite possibly change—their own views.

Some opinion researchers have contended that the standard technical concept of attitude is not useful for understanding public opinion, because it is insufficiently complex. Crespi, for example, preferred to speak of “attitudinal systems,” which he characterized as the combined development of four sets of phenomena: (1) values and interests, (2) knowledge and beliefs, (3) feelings, and (4) behavioral intentions (i.e., conscious inclinations to act in certain ways).

Perhaps the most important concept in public opinion research is that of values. Values are of considerable importance in determining whether people will form opinions on a particular topic; in general, they are more likely to do so when they perceive that their values require it. Values are adopted early in life, in many cases from parents and schools. They are not likely to change, and they strengthen as people grow older. They encompass beliefs about religion—including belief (or disbelief) in God—political outlook, moral standards, and the like. As Worcester’s analogy suggests, values are relatively resistant to ordinary attempts at persuasion and to influence by the media, and they rarely shift as a result of positions or arguments expressed in a single debate. Yet they can be shaped—and in some cases completely changed—by prolonged exposure to conflicting values, by concerted thought and discussion, by the feeling that one is “out of step” with others whom one knows and respects, and by the development of significantly new evidence or circumstances.

Formation of attitudes

Once an issue is generally recognized, some people will begin to form attitudes about it. If an attitude is expressed to others by sufficient numbers of people, a public opinion on the topic begins to emerge. Not all people will develop a particular attitude about a public issue; some may not be interested, and others simply may not hear about it.

The attitudes that are formed may be held for various reasons. Thus, among people who oppose higher property taxes, one group may be unable to afford them, another may wish to deny additional tax revenues to welfare recipients, another may disagree with a certain government policy, and another may wish to protest what it sees as wasteful government spending. A seemingly homogeneous body of public opinion may therefore be composed of individual opinions that are rooted in very different interests and values. If an attitude does not serve a function such as one of the above, it is unlikely to be formed: an attitude must be useful in some way to the person who holds it.
Factors influencing public opinion

Environmental factors

Environmental factors play a critical part in the development of opinions and attitudes. Most pervasive is the influence of the social environment: family, friends, neighborhood, place of work, church, or school. People usually adjust their attitudes to conform to those that are most prevalent in the social groups to which they belong. Researchers have found, for example, that if a person in the United States who considers himself a liberal becomes surrounded in his home or at his place of work by people who profess conservatism, he is more likely to start voting for conservative candidates than is a liberal whose family and friends share his political views. Similarly, it was found during World War II that men in the U.S. military who transferred from one unit to another often adjusted their opinions to conform more closely to those of the unit to which they were transferred.

The mass media

Newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet—including e-mail and blogs—are usually less influential than the social environment, but they are still significant, especially in affirming attitudes and opinions that are already established. The news media focus the public’s attention on certain personalities and issues, leading many people to form opinions about them. Government officials accordingly have noted that communications to them from the public tend to “follow the headlines.”

The mass media can also reinforce latent attitudes and “activate” them, prompting people to take action. Just before an election, for example, voters who earlier had only a mild preference for one party or candidate may be inspired by media coverage not only to take the trouble to vote but perhaps also to contribute money or to help a party organization in some other way.

The mass media play another important role by letting individuals know what other people think and by giving political leaders large audiences. In this way the media make it possible for public opinion to encompass large numbers of individuals and wide geographic areas. It appears, in fact, that in some European countries the growth of broadcasting, especially television, affected the operation of the parliamentary system. Before television, national elections were seen largely as contests between a number of candidates or parties for parliamentary seats. As the electronic media grew more sophisticated technologically, elections increasingly assumed the appearance of a personal struggle between the leaders of the principal parties concerned. In the United States, presidential candidates have come to personify their parties. Once in office, a president can easily appeal to a national audience over the heads of elected legislative representatives.

In areas where the mass media are thinly spread, as in developing counties or in countries where the media are strictly controlled, word of mouth can sometimes perform the same functions as the press and broadcasting, though on a more limited scale. In developing countries, it is common for those who are literate to read from newspapers to those who are not, or for large numbers of persons to gather around the village radio or a community television. Word of mouth in the marketplace or neighborhood then carries the information farther.

In countries where important news is suppressed by the government, a great deal of information is transmitted by rumor. Word of mouth (or other forms of person-to-person communication, such as text messaging) thus becomes the vehicle for underground public opinion in totalitarian countries, even though these processes are slower and usually involve fewer people than in countries where the media network is dense and uncontrolled.

Interest groups

Interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, and labour unions (trade unions) cultivate the formation and spread of public opinion on issues of concern to their constituencies. These groups may be concerned with political, economic, or ideological issues, and most work through the mass media as well as by word of mouth. Some of the larger or more affluent interest groups around the world make use of advertising and public relations. One increasingly popular tactic is the informal poll or straw vote. In this approach, groups ask their members and supporters to “vote”—usually by phone or via the Internet—in unsystematic “polls” of public opinion that are not carried out with proper sampling procedures. Multiple votes by
supporters are often encouraged, and once the group releases its findings to credible media outlets, it claims legitimacy by citing the publication of its poll in a recognized newspaper or online news source.

Reasons for conducting unscientific polls range from their entertainment value to their usefulness in manipulating public opinion, especially by interest groups or issue-specific organizations, some of which exploit straw-poll results as a means of making their causes appear more significant than they actually are. On any given issue, however, politicians will weigh the relatively disinterested opinions and attitudes of the majority against the committed values of smaller but more-dedicated groups for whom retribution at the ballot box is more likely.

**Opinion leaders**

Opinion leaders play a major role in defining popular issues and in influencing individual opinions regarding them. Political leaders in particular can turn a relatively unknown problem into a national issue if they decide to call attention to it in the media. One of the ways in which opinion leaders rally opinion and smooth out differences among those who are in basic agreement on a subject is by inventing symbols or coinage slogans: in the words of U.S. Pres. Woodrow Wilson, the Allies in World War I were fighting “a war to end all wars,” while aiming “to make the world safe for democracy”; post-World War II relations with the Soviet Union were summed up in the term “Cold War,” first used by U.S. presidential adviser Bernard Baruch in 1947. Once enunciated, symbols and slogans are frequently kept alive and communicated to large audiences by the mass media and may become the cornerstone of public opinion on any given issue.

Opinion leadership is not confined to prominent figures in public life. An opinion leader can be any person to whom others look for guidance on a certain subject. Thus, within a given social group one person may be regarded as especially well-informed about local politics, another as knowledgeable about foreign affairs, and another as expert in real estate. These local opinion leaders are generally unknown outside their own circle of friends and acquaintances, but their cumulative influence in the formation of public opinion is substantial.

**Complex influences**

Because psychological makeup, personal circumstances, and external influences all play a role in the formation of each person’s opinions, it is difficult to predict how public opinion on an issue will take shape. The same is true with regard to changes in public opinion. Some public opinions can be explained by specific events and circumstances, but in other cases the causes are more elusive. (Some opinions, however, are predictable: the public’s opinions about other countries, for example, seem to depend largely on the state of relations between the governments involved. Hostile public attitudes do not cause poor relations—they are the result of them.)

People presumably change their own attitudes when they no longer seem to correspond with prevailing circumstances and, hence, fail to serve as guides to action. Similarly, a specific event, such as a natural disaster or a human tragedy, can heighten awareness of underlying problems or concerns and trigger changes in public opinion. Public opinion about the environment, for instance, has been influenced by single events such as the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962; by the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986; by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s 1988 address to the Royal Society on a number of environmental topics, including global warming; by the accidental spill from the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* in 1989; and by the Academy Award-winning documentary on climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth*, in 2006. It is nonetheless the case that whether a body of public opinion on a given issue is formed and sustained depends to a significant extent on the attention it receives in the mass media.

Some changes in public opinion have been difficult for experts to explain. During the second half of the 20th century in many parts of the world, attitudes toward religion, family, sex, international relations, social welfare, and the economy underwent major shifts. Although important issues have claimed public attention in all these areas, the scope of change in public attitudes and opinions is difficult to attribute to any major event or even to any complex of events.