

Public Opinion Research in Political Science

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Abstract

Since the late nineteenth century, the tension generated by the lumping of subjective and personal *opinion* with objective and common *public* as a single concept is matter that urged scholars to provide a comprehensive definition of public opinion. This article is intended to trace the history of the modern study of public opinion in political science. It begins with a description of the early theoretical works and their attempts to investigate the mass public through systematic and normative analyses, and then focuses on the individual and psychological dimension examined by contemporary empirical works. The article draws some conclusions on both the main achievements and the most manifested limitations that this branch of political analysis must overcome in order to better understand the relationship between public opinion and democratic governance.

Keywords: Public Opinion – Mass Belief – Responsiveness – Empirical Research – Opinion Surveys

The concept of ‘public opinion’ is intrinsically controversial. Literally, it is composed of the juxtaposition of two terms that seem to be in open contradiction. On the one hand, the element of publicity implies an aggregate phenomenon, that is, the existence of a collective entity which is something different from the mere sum of single units. On the other hand, the term ‘opinion’ is strictly related to the individual subjectivity. Indeed, an opinion is a judgement of evaluation that may be rational as well as instinctive, stable or volatile, expressed or unspoken. Because of these intrinsic and ambiguous features, it seems to concern the private dimension of an individual rather than the majority belief of a group.

Since the late nineteenth century, the tension generated by the lumping of subjective and personal ‘opinion’ with objective and common ‘public’ as a single concept urged scholars to provide a comprehensive definition of public opinion. This requirement became even more relevant with the emergence of the empirical approach in social sciences. As Lazarsfeld (1957) reminds us, in a thoughtful and informative paper, after the First World War, an interesting confrontation emerged between the so-called empiricists and the exponents of the classical tradition (e.g., Lindsay Rogers and Herbert Blumer), with the latter group essentially accusing the former of using the expression *public opinion* without offering a sound definition of the term. Nonetheless, the event that more than any other put a strong emphasis on the study of mass opinion was the rise of the democratic state. Since democratic regimes were supposed to represent and be held accountable to their people, not only historians and sociologists, but also political scientists started investigating the mass public as a crucial force for the consolidation and stability of a modern democracy. Political commentators and, suddenly, political researchers began to describe the specific features of public opinion within a democracy: the nature of mass beliefs, values and attitudes and the way these are formed

and distributed, as well as the relationship between the public and political leaders. Independently from their specific goals, all of these works were aimed at discovering the characteristics of public opinion and defining its effective role in politics.

This article intends to trace the history of the modern study of public opinion in political science. It is divided into four main parts. The first part presents the early theoretical works and their attempts to investigate the mass public through a systematic and normative perspective. The second part introduces the development of the empirical approach and shows how the scope of research has gradually expanded to address not only the nature of the mass belief system but also the relationship between public opinion and the political process. The third part focuses on contemporary empirical works and their attention to the individual and psychological (rather than the social) dimension of public opinion. The fourth and final part is devoted to the internationalization of public opinion research and the spread of this discipline from the United States to the rest of contemporary democracies. Finally, the article draws some conclusions both on the main achievements and the most manifested limitations that this branch of political analysis must inevitably overcome in order to better understand the relationship between public opinion and democratic governance.

EARLY THEORETICAL WORKS IN PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH (FROM BRYCE TO DEWEY)

Although the concept of 'public opinion' has a fairly long and rich history¹, the first study that comprehensively treats this collective entity as a crucial force of the democratic system is James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* (1888). As Michael Korzi's study of the roots of American public opinion research highlights, this seminal work "anticipated [...] debates and problems that would [have] inform[ed] later studies" (Korzi 2000, 51). In general, Bryce focused on three major facets of public opinion, the same that subsequent scholars considered in debating the meaning of public opinion in politics. These facets are, respectively: the competence of the public, the constitution of public opinion, and the relationship of public opinion with opinion leaders (i.e., the role of public opinion in the democratic political process).

Bryce's major finding was that the mass public lacked any general interest in politics. Nonetheless, despite the uninterested and incompetent character of public opinion in relation to political issues, the author argued that a distinction had to be made between 'sentiment' and 'thought'. While the public was rich with the former, it seemed to lack the latter. Since sentiment was more important than thought for political judgement, and given that common people were generally of sound 'sentiment', he concluded that mass participation in the political process was nothing which should generate either alarm or preoccupation. On the contrary, it was what the concept of democracy prescribed for a correct management of political power. Indeed, according to Bryce, mass public dominated American politics and this predominantly happened through political parties.

Although the idea of an influential public was shared by other authors, it did not always lead them to the same conclusion. In the early decades of the twentieth century, A. Lawrence Lowell and Walter Lippmann respectively published *Public opinion and Popular*

¹ Some scholars claim that public opinion research originated with the *cahiers* of the French Revolution when the opinion of the public was opposed to the power of a small elite. Others, instead, point either to the first known example of opinion poll, conducted by two newspapers (i.e., the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian and the Raleigh Star) in 1824, or to the first courses in marketing.

Government (1913) and *Public Opinion* (1922). The former study, which can be considered as the first systematic attempt to investigate the relationship between public opinion and the national government, described a not so different public from that depicted by Bryce, concluding that the role of people in public affairs should be delimited only when necessary. Conversely, the latter argued that because of the incapability of the mass public to manage daily political information and because of the public's negative impact on the decision-making process, public opinion's role in politics had to be severely constrained. This initiative would have avoided incoherent and erratic initiatives that, according to the author, were unequivocally caused by the strong influence played by the mass public on the political process. Since the common citizen did not possess the necessary instruments – if not the use of simplification, generalization and stereotypes – to deal with the myriad of stimuli produced by a modern society, he/she was unable to deal with the complexity of political issues.

Lippmann's pessimism was partially mitigated by John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). Here, the public was considered to be capable of making judgement and, therefore, there were no reasons to exclude this force from the political process. What people needed, instead, was to be provided with the necessary resources for becoming more competent, informed, and active than they seemed to be at that time. Although Dewey – as well as Lippmann and Lowell – described public opinion as a collection of aggregated individual opinions, he nonetheless emphasised the interactive aspects of the concept. In a few words, Dewey pointed out that social relations had a strong impact in shaping individuals. Public opinion, therefore, was the result of the interactive behaviour of individuals and groups who were rooted in traditions, cultures, and institutions. This statement led the author to depict the general public as a composite of smaller and diverse publics and to conclude that it was misleading to speak of this entity as a mere aggregation of individual opinions.

Dewey's holistic interpretation of the notion of public opinion will also be present in what can be considered as the first attempts to provide an empiricist solution to the study of public opinion. Indeed, while the early theoretical works manifested a normative and speculative approach, the subsequent studies focused on the individual and his socio-psychological attributes. The adoption of this new approach was possible thanks to many innovations in research methods, first and foremost, the development of the scientific opinion poll.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EMPIRICAL APPROACH

Shortly before the beginning of the Second World War, stimulated by commercial communication research² and the introduction of a new tool for measuring public attitudes, that is, the modern opinion poll, many researchers involved in the study of democratic politics became interested in the theory and method of opinion measurement. Most of these studies may be dated back to the mid-1930s when the first issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* was published and the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO), just founded

² Commercial communication research, which remained almost entirely quantitative, developed in the United States between 1910 and 1920 and was mainly interested in measuring the size and the characteristics of radio audience and newspaper readers (see Crossley 1957 for a descriptive analysis of the role of the mass media in the development of public opinion research).

by George Gallup, demonstrated that the views of the public could be scientifically determined through the use of a system of interviewing based on accurate samples³.

As soon as the polling technique was refined through the consolidation of sampling and interviewing techniques, both the methodological criteria and the issues that public opinion research had previously adopted and investigated changed drastically. Gradually, normative theoretical concerns were substituted by methodological problems as well as systemic-holistic analyses by studies conducted at the individual level. This process was undoubtedly influenced by the idea that social scientists could finally have at their own disposal an advanced research tool, like their naturalist colleagues. Although the adoption of the experimental method was still far from being achieved, the fact that individual attitudes could be quantitatively measured brought many researchers to embrace this new discipline.

By the 1940s, public opinion research considerably broadened both in method and in scope and a proliferating literature emerged in this field. Considering the extraordinary number of articles, papers, essays, and books that have been published since then, a thorough review of all these works is impossible to do. Nonetheless, I will try to summarise the main tendencies and interests in the discipline by presenting the most important and representative works.

As mentioned before, many of the studies published between the 1940s and the 1960s focused on the psychological and social characteristics of the individual to explain aggregate social patterns. Opinions were described as "reactions of individuals [which could not] be allocated to publics without becoming ambiguous and unintelligible for research" (Allport 1937, 8-9). The conception of a public opinion as monolithic force or 'great voice' was abandoned. On the contrary, the dynamics of the public opinion process were seen as lying within a more complex framework of collective systems of events where the interaction of different individuals, with their roles and capacities, contributed to defining the structure of the collective action (Allport 1940, 251). In this sense, Childs (1939) defined public opinion as "any collection of individual opinions, regardless of the degree of agreement or uniformity. The degree of uniformity [was] a matter to be investigated, [rather than] something to be arbitrarily set up as a condition for the existence of public opinion" (1939, 332).

Besides these operational concerns, efforts were made to improve survey research techniques. Statisticians, psychometricians (e.g., Harold Gulliksen, Rensis Likert, Louis Leon Thurstone), and even mathematicians contributed to the development of a scientific method in data collection and interpretation, but the main debate concerned the use (and to some, the abuse) of polls in public opinion research. On the one hand, scholars such as Herbert Blumer (1948) and Lindsay Rogers (1949) questioned the ability of the pollsters to gauge public attitudes, starting from the premise that public opinion was much more than the aggregated opinions of individuals. According to these authors, this entity could not be described without referring to relations and institutional processes from which it was originated. On the other hand, public opinion researchers (e.g., most of the members of the new American Association for Public Opinion Research)⁴ offered a different formulation of the problem, arguing that polls not only provided a crucial tool for studying public attitudes

³ Although national polls on electoral issues had been already introduced by private companies and national magazines (e.g., the Farm Journal and the Literary Digest), Gallup's organization had the merit to show the importance of scientific method in describing public opinion's preferences. In 1936 the AIPO succeeded in predicting the outcome of presidential election, a difficult objective in which other companies had clearly failed.

⁴ The constitution of the AAPOR was formalised on September 4, 1947. In 1948 the *Public Opinion Quarterly* became the official journal of the association.

and preferences but that they also represented an additional mean to show what the people thought of the government's policies and other political issues.

However, the political and sociological perspectives that had led early theoretical works on public opinion gradually disappeared. Consistently with the behaviorist approach that dominated the whole discipline at the time, sociological and psychological processes were becoming the topic of modern research and the survey the instrument used to discover and interpret them.

The 1960s started with the publication of two important works interested in the study of the psychological bases of opinion formation: Campbell et al.'s *The American Voter* (1960)⁵ and Philippe Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). As the title suggests, the former study took "the individual's voting act as a starting point [... and, then,] moved backward in time and outward from political influences to trace the intricate pattern of causality leading to behaviour at the polls" (Campbell et al. 1960, p.521)⁶. Among the conclusions of this group of scholars⁷, based on an attentive study of election survey data (the National Election Studies), was that party identification played a relevant role in voters' decision to cast their ballots. Nevertheless, the American public was 'innocent of ideology', that is, it did not generally think in ideological terms. This argument was developed in Converse's article, in which he claimed that "the common citizen fails to develop more global points of view about politics. A realistic picture of political belief systems in the mass public, [therefore, was] not one that omit[ted] issues and policy demands completely nor one that presume[d] widespread ideological coherence; it [was] rather one that capture[d] with some fidelity the fragmentation, narrowness, and diversity of these demands" (Converse 1964, 247). Such a view derived from one of the main Converse's master themes: the "nonattitudes hypothesis". In a few words, Converse argued that large numbers of the public did not hold any view on major political issues, but when asked their opinion, they expressed one anyway. The reason for this ambiguous behaviour laid in the fact that people were interested in avoiding the embarrassment of appearing ignorant or negligent. These counterfeit attitudes, called by Converse "nonattitudes"⁸, were presented as pervasive features of the political thinking of mass publics, and they were negatively related to the level of political awareness and information.

Unquestionably, both of these works established a baseline for most of the following studies in public opinion. In particular, their statements over the (ir)rational and (un)sophisticated nature of the mass public caused a fervent debate over the forces that affect individual's political behaviour in contemporary democracies and the characteristics of this actor.

The different streams of study that developed from these themes included a large body of methodological research, and distinct models of public opinion were generated even in political science. While some scholars followed Converse's reasoning and described public opinion as an artefact of polls (Bourdieu 1979; Ginsberg 1986; see also Herbst 1993), others minimised the "nonattitude" problem, attributing the largest part of response inconsistency either to measurement errors (Achen 1975; Erikson 1979; Jackson 1983) or data misinterpretations (Key 1966; Brody & Page 1975; Page 1978). Finally, some others openly

⁵ See also Converse (1962).

⁶ This passage is also quoted in Korzi (2000, p.63).

⁷ The authors were colleagues at the University of Michigan.

⁸ This term, however, was coined in a subsequent study: see Converse (1970).

questioned Converse's theory, assessing that the general public's collective preferences were neither meaningless and self-contradictory opinions nor random "nonattitudes". By contrast, they were rational, stable, and coherent preferences whose possible and predictable changes could not be described as mood-driven reactions to the interviewer's stimuli but, rather, as sensible adjustments to the new conditions and information that had been communicated to the public (Shapiro & Page 1988; Page & Shapiro 1992). In this sense, and to better understand the function exercised by modern mass media in shaping citizens' attitudes, public opinion research started investigating how and to what extent news coverage could affect public preferences (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Iyengar et al. 1982; Kernell 1986; Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Page et al. 1987; Brody 1991; Jordan & Page 1992; Jordan 1993).

In sum, if in the 1960s, the picture that most of the researchers gave of the public was not really different from that of the early theoretical works (i.e., a volatile, ill-informed, capricious and incoherent public opinion), by the 1970s and, more impressively, during the 1980s, scholars involved in the field described another public. This second phase of public opinion research ended with the publication of a monumental work, that is, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* by John R. Zaller (1992), which set the bases for a new theory of public opinion.

Briefly, what Zaller argued was that the problem with public opinion was not, as Converse had suggested, that citizens have too few ideas. It was, Zaller contended, just the opposite. Most people, indeed, have many ideas on all sides of different (political) issues. But these ideas are stored in memory without placing them in any order and without verifying a consistency among them. When questioned about a problem, the common man directs his attention to one idea or the other in relation to the relevance of the problem. Therefore, each time he is asked a question (even the same question but in different contexts), he can select different considerations from his memory in answering. Question wording and ordering would have a great impact in this process because they force people to focus their attention on certain aspects of the problem rather than on others. Thus, sampling considerations from memory would be the pivotal mechanism underlying nonattitudes, a mechanism which can explain the instability of people's response probabilities. This explanatory model, however, would not exclude the hypothesis that politically sophisticated respondents (i.e., those who are more interested in politics) might have a more stable response pattern than the unsophisticated ones. It is highly likely, in fact, that the balance of considerations that are present in the formers' mind, which is used for answering survey questions, will be differently exposed to external pressures and changes in political communication than the ideas ordered by the latter group of respondents.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH AND THE GROWING INTEREST IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICS

In the concluding chapter of his volume, Zaller (1992) addressed the possibilities of elite domination of public opinion with a sharp eye towards issues of democratic governance. Although the theme was not unknown to public opinion research, it consolidated an emerging tendency of contemporary studies. Taking as their starting point some theoretical models that suggested a substantial impact of citizens' preferences on the policy-making process (e.g., Downs 1957), since the late 1980s, a group of scholars began to investigate the relationship between public opinion and politics both in a 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'

perspective. On one hand, studying the way with which the public assimilated and responded to elite-supplied information and leadership cues, they recognised the unavoidable dependence of mass opinion on the information and analyses carried out in the elite discourse. It followed that individuals and institutions which provided information and factual interpretations of political events played a key role in structuring public's policy preferences. Such a consideration, which was largely in contrast with what scholars had stated in the previous decades⁹, implied that public opinion could be misled and even manipulated if provided with incorrect, biased, or selective information (Brody 1991; Page & Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992; Jacobs & Shapiro 2000). On the other hand, empirical studies demonstrated that the public (now considered as a collective body) was able to affect the policy-making process of a democratic country. Page and Shapiro (1983) found that significant changes in the American public's preferences were followed by congruent changes in policy about two-thirds of the time¹⁰. Similarly, Stimson discovered a strict correlation between shifts in public mood and government policies (Stimson 1991, 2004). Although any influence of public opinion on the process of policy formation was traditionally regarded with scepticism by policy analysts and policy development researchers (Kingdon 1984; Skocpol 1995, 1996), public opinion scholars demonstrated that the public's sentiment mattered in the policy-making process. Political leaders proved this by taking this actor in strong consideration when they made decisions¹¹.

At this point it must be noted that most of these studies adopted not only quantitative research strategies and survey techniques, but they also made use of qualitative methods to verify the results of the last 40 years' research and offer new methodological perspectives in the study of public opinion. Interestingly, this innovation was concomitant with a greater and more systematic attention to the linkages between the mass public and decision-makers. Although the study of the psychological dynamics which move the public's attitudes still represented a crucial topic, these works had the merit to fill an important gap existing in literature. Public opinion research manifested a vivid interest in the reciprocal influence that the masses and the elites have on each other.

Moreover, especially after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War era, a number of scholars began to examine the public's attitudes in relation to foreign policy issues (Shapiro & Page 1988; Jentleson 1992; Nincic 1992; Larson 1996; Oneal et al. 1996; Holsti 1996) and the impact that popular sentiments could produce on the management of this policy area. Although the opinion of the public was not necessarily presented as a decisive factor for the undertaking and enactment of a particular foreign policy action, it was shown that public beliefs were sometimes able to influence the way in which a democratic government behaved in foreign affairs (Russett 1990; Powlick 1991; Risse-Kappen 1991; Morgan & Bickers 1992).

THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

Much of the debate on opinion patterns has been centred on the American public. Less attention, instead, has been devoted to other democratic contexts. Several factors have

⁹ Lazarsfeld, for instance, considered the media effect as 'minimal'. Consequently, also the danger that political elites could exploit the media to manipulate mass opinion was minimal as well.

¹⁰ See also Page (1994) and Monroe (1998).

¹¹ See Manza and Cook (2002) and Burstein (2003) for a review of these works.

contributed to this situation. Nevertheless, three of them seem to have exercised the greatest influence.

First, it must be noted that with few notable exceptions (i.e., the United Kingdom and, to some extent, France), opinion polls have developed in the rest of the world with an evident delay when compared to the United States. Moreover, the spread of the survey method would have been very difficult if it had not been for the support provided by some American institutions. After the Second World War, for instance, the U.S. Defence Department sponsored the establishment of survey units in Germany and Japan in order to test these publics' sentiments and to train an embryonic group of survey researchers in these new democracies. Then, the expansion of U.S. business activities and the interest of some American academics in carrying out early experiments of local and cross-national research allowed this research field to progress in other democratic countries. George Gallup and his AIPO were largely responsible for the internationalisation of opinion polling. Between the 1930s and the 1940s, they promoted and financed their work through a network of independent agencies which had agreed to trade data and methodologies. In this way, survey research slowly emerged in Australia, Britain, Canada, France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries. Cross-national and multinational research efforts were also made in Japan and Latin America and, by the end of the 1970s, polls were being conducted in all European countries¹², many communist nations, and in numerous Third World countries.

The second factor for a research mainly focused on the American public is partially connected with the first factor in that each of them conditioned the persistence of the other in the early stages of the discipline. Since the overwhelming majority of political scientists involved in this field were Americans, their main interests concerned the study of the nature of American public opinion and its role in U.S. politics. Only a few of them, indeed, tried either to analyse mass attitudes in other democracies or to compare different publics¹³. If, on the one hand, this situation was undoubtedly (albeit not totally) due to the unavailability of data for these publics, on the other hand, it contributed to the persistent indifference of the American research for comparative studies. Only the spread of scientific opinion polling along with a collaborative research effort between American and (mainly) European scholars allowed the internationalisation of public opinion studies between the 1980s and the 1990s (e.g., Eichenberg 1989; Wilcox et al. 1993; Sobel 1996; Nacos et al. 2000).

The third factor deals with the major institutional feature of the American political system. Since the president is directly elected by the people, the government, the opposition, and political analysts have a common interest in understanding the mechanics which link a leader with his/her electorate, even if this interest is motivated by different reasons. If we start from the premise that the final goal of a president is to be re-elected and that of the opposition is to avoid such an eventuality, we can figure out how the understanding of public opinion is important for politics. This is not to say that in parliamentary political systems governments and other elite groups are not concerned with the public's sentiment, but that the institutionalisation of a direct connection between the highest governmental office and the mass public makes the person who holds the presidency more attentive to what the

¹² The Eurobarometer programme, founded in the early 1970s and regularized in 1974, had a key role in monitoring the evolution of public opinion in the European Economic Community's member states.

¹³ Furthermore, non-American scholars who became involved in the discipline often preferred to investigate the relationship between the public and politics in a world superpower rather than starting new research initiatives in smaller and less powerful countries.

people think of his/her performance. This direct connection would also explain the great number of works that American scholars have produced on the subject of presidential popularity – a topic which seems to be much less interesting for most of their European colleagues.

However, as noticed above, these factors did not prevent public opinion research from being established in other countries. In the past twenty years, as progress in technology and polling methodology extended the usefulness, timeliness, and accuracy of poll findings, this discipline experienced a rapid growth.

In modern democracies, public opinion research and polling information are used by officials and politicians to ascertain popular views on various issues, to detect changes in public opinion, to anticipate how the electorate will respond to policy shifts, to verify their own popularity rates as well as those of their adversaries, and for many other purposes¹⁴. Although research suggests that policymakers' responsiveness to public opinion is rather complex and difficult to disentangle, a growing body of studies has pointed to the linkage between politics and public opinion. The interest of the academic community in this discipline is also demonstrated by the number of research centres created within (or associated with) faculties of political science. Nowadays, almost every university in the United States and Europe offers undergraduate and graduate courses in public opinion. Moreover, experts are constantly recruited by mass media, polling agencies, political parties, governments, and other institutions to carry out public opinion analysis.

In sum, public opinion research is experiencing significant development. This does not mean that limitations do not affect the study of mass attitudes. Rather, it means that realistic expectations for improvement exist. Let's see what they are.

CONCLUSION

This brief overview aimed at presenting the main works produced by public opinion research in relation to political issues. Three dominant research traditions have characterised this discipline. The first tradition, which began in the late nineteenth century and lasted until the mid-1930s, saw the emergence of early theoretical works interested in the aggregate study of the mass public. Following a normative approach, scholars such as Bryce, Lowell, Lippmann, and Dewey focused on the sociological and political aspects of this collective actor to describe its effective role within a modern democracy. Although the picture that emerged was not that of an informed, competent, and rational public, some of these authors argued that people's role in public affairs should not be constrained. By contrast, they claimed that people had to be informed and educated for acquiring more political competence and for becoming more participative in politics.

The second tradition shared the idea of a fickle and unsophisticated public. However, scholars belonging to this school of thought did not specifically address the problem of the existing relationship between public opinion and democratic governance. Strongly influenced by the new empiricist methods, their studies were psychologically driven without any substantial interest in politics and democratic theory. If these research efforts contributed to the development of better methodological tools to study the nature of mass public's beliefs, they did not allow public opinion research to progress in the field of political science.

¹⁴ For an overview of the growing use of polls by political elite, see Geer (1996).

Only in the 1980s such a psychological/individual paradigm was substituted by more systematic attention towards the linkages between the mass public and decision-makers. This evolution set the basis for a new research tradition. The study of public opinion – a concept which was intended to be essentially connected to the process of governing – gained renewed meaning, purpose, and direction. As Korzi assesses, this may be described as “an effort to understand not just the ‘micro-politics’ of public opinion, but also the ‘macro-politics’” (Korzi 2000, p.74), that is, the political dimension of the mass public. Thanks to this effort, the debate on the normative implications of public opinion research was stimulated and new results contributed to widening the analytical perspective of this discipline.

Nevertheless, despite the intrinsic importance of a strong intermingling of public opinion and psychological research, the two fields often continue to diverge in their trajectories: the former more centred on the origin of individual belief systems, the latter more interested in aggregate public opinion patterns. Without any doubt, this represents a first limitation for the full understanding of the role of people’s attitudes in contemporary governing processes.

It must be noted that this deficiency only partially coincides with another methodological problem: the separation between qualitative and quantitative research strategies. However, it is unquestionable that, once the distance between normative and empiricist methods was reduced, a contrast emerged between those who mainly relied on quantitative survey methodology to infer about public’s perceptions of political events and those who preferred the use of qualitative tools to examine individual thought processes. If some researchers interested in the study of the relationship between the public and political elites contributed to filling this gap by demonstrating the benefits of adopting both strategies, a clear distinction between them is still being made. Although this seems to be necessary from a strictly methodological point of view, sometimes it was one of the major causes for poor results. Indeed, public opinion research could substantially benefit from a methodological framework which makes use of quantitative and qualitative strategies.

Both of these gaps should be seriously addressed in future research initiatives. Progress in the study of public opinion and politics depends to a considerable degree on the development of projects which combine different research approaches. Only in this way we will be able to synthesise the results of different studies, increasing both their external and internal validity. On the one hand, the separation between aggregate and individual analyses should be overcome by establishing new points of contact between these perspectives, which are both fundamentally intended to study the relationship between public opinion and political elites. On the other hand, the adoption of qualitative and quantitative techniques may provide an extraordinary opportunity to obtain new information on networks, forces, and processes which underpin the linkage between opinion and policy-making.

In sum, the need for broad gauge opinion studies is a really important one. A valuable thinking on the relation between governmental decision and public opinion clearly depends on the joining of different research trends. Although this task does not seem particularly easy to accomplish, it is undoubtedly a worthwhile endeavour. Whether and how this proposal could be included in the agenda for future research and, then, translated into effective projects is a matter of debate.

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