
BACKGROUND BOOKS

PUBLIC OPINION

Fifty-seven years ago, Walter Lippmann wrote that the pictures inside the heads of human beings, "the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships" are their "public opinions." Those pictures "which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals also acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters."

These definitions, from **Public Opinion** (Harcourt, 1922, cloth; Free Press, 1965, paper) are as precise as any we are likely to get. Writing long before the advent of TV news, Lippmann emphasizes the barriers to informed opinion, notably the "comparatively meager time available [to citizens] in each day for paying attention to public affairs" and "the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages." His conclusion, that "public opinions" must be organized not *by* the press but *for* the press "if they are to be sound," is one on which political scientists, sociologists, and for-hire pollsters have been attempting to act ever since.

Much of the best work on the art of determining public opinion and the factors that influence it has been published only in obscure specialized journals. Some articles are available in anthologies, including Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz's **Reader in Public Opinion and Communication** (Free Press, 1950; 2nd ed., 1966). This widely used compendium opens with a brief history of the concept of *vox populi* from Roman times (Machiavelli in *The Prince* observed that "Not without reason is the voice of the people compared to the voice of God").

Fairly heavy going for the general reader but still the most important intellectual assessment of its subject is V. O. Key's **Public Opinion and American Democracy** (Knopf, 1961). Key's recognition that interest in assessing public opinion was diminishing among political scientists, while gaining ground with sociologists, led him to analyze two decades' worth of copious findings in an attempt to place the new knowledge produced by surveys and polls in a political context. He asserts that all the research of the 1940s and '50s seemed to confirm the existence of a category of well-educated "influentials" in American society. This group is to blame, he writes, "if a democracy tends toward indecision, decay, and disaster"; the masses "do not corrupt themselves."

Professional pollsters have never been shy about publishing. George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae in **The Pulse of Democracy** (Simon & Schuster, 1940; Greenwood reprint, 1968) contrast the *Literary Digest's* disastrous "gigantic sampling" of voter intentions in the 1936 presidential election with the predictive accuracy of the "scientific" state-by-state polling done by Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion (average deviation 6.1 percent), the Crossley organization for the Hearst newspapers (average deviation 5.8 percent), and *Fortune* magazine's "amazingly accurate" popular vote totals.

Charles W. Roll, Jr. and Albert H. Cantril, co-authors of **Polls: Their Use and Misuse in Politics** (Basic Books, 1972), warn of the dangers inherent in the use of surveys by politi-

cians who pander to the people's prejudices and exploit their many legitimate fears. But they argue that national leaders must accurately gauge public opinion before making decisions if there is to be any chance of successful implementation.

Cantril worked in Lyndon Johnson's White House. His father, psychologist Hadley Cantril, established the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton in 1940. One of the elder Cantril's many books, **The Human Dimension: Experiences in Policy Research** (Rutgers, 1967), is an engaging account of his own and others' polling efforts for the Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations. He includes Lloyd Free's early study of the Cuban people's support for Fidel Castro, ignored at the time; it showed 86 percent of the urban population expressing enthusiasm for his regime. After the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion attempt in 1961, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., then Special Assistant to JFK, wrote to Free that he only wished "a copy had come to my attention earlier."

In **War, Presidents, and Public Opinion** (Wiley, 1973, cloth & paper), John E. Mueller finds that the Korean and Vietnam wars each inspired support and opposition from the same sectors of the population with one "striking exception"—the "Jewish subgroup" that solidly supported the Korean War but opposed the war in Vietnam.

The possible effect of TV campaign "horse-race" coverage is a matter of argument in the United States today.

In **Polls, Television, and the New Politics** (Chandler, 1970, paper only), Harold A. Mendelsohn and Irving Crespi look carefully at the function of polls in presidential elections 1952–68. They dispute the theory that voters tend to favor candidates who look like winners on Election Day.

Leo Bogart, in **Silent Politics: Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion** (Wiley, 1972, cloth; Orbis, 1977, paper), finds much disturbing in both the techniques employed by opinion research specialists (e.g., weighted questions) and the uses to which data is put. Every major election in recent years has brought forth inquests on the political effects of polls, he reports, and even minor politicians have called for direct restrictions on the pollsters. In 1968, the mayor of Rockledge, Fla., a Romney supporter, incensed that his candidate had withdrawn from the New Hampshire primary on the basis of a poll "before the people had a chance to vote for or against him," persuaded his city council to draft an ordinance forbidding national pollsters to quiz Rockledge residents about their politics.

On the plus side, Bogart concludes that the best opinion research forces pundits and politicians to recognize that the opinions of the apathetic and disengaged cannot be equated with those of an informed citizenry aware of its stake in the issues and its own accountability. This, he writes, "makes polls a factor in the political process rather than merely an account of it."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Many titles were recommended by Wilson Center Fellows Gladys and Kurt Lang, who are studying media coverage and public opinion during Watergate.*