

PUBLICS, POLLS, AND PUBLIC OPINION

By David A. Hubert

It's a long way from Rousseau to the Roper Center.

During the Enlightenment, the term public opinion first achieved a measure of currency in political thought. It was Jean Jacques Rousseau who in 1744 launched the phrase¹. Today, the Roper Center, as the largest repository of survey data, has become closely associated with public opinion as a concept. Comparing the two concepts—Rousseau's and the contemporary one underlying the Center's archive—we see how far understanding of public opinion has evolved.

Locke, Rousseau, and a Role for the Public

The Enlightenment culminated a period of social thought in which the idea of a politically capable public developed. The long record of human history is marked almost exclusively by civilizations in which the great mass of people had no moral or practical claim on the exercise of political power. We should not, however, project the totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century back onto earlier times. A true public did not exist in most of human history not because the general populace was oppressed, although tyranny has a long history as well, but because it was largely ignored. The natural order of society simply did not consider the possibility that the people mattered politically.

The Puritan revolution in seventeenth century England provided an impetus for recognizing a true mass public. However, it was during the Enlightenment, with its faith in human reason, that the political sovereignty of the people became a central concern for social thought. Writers such as Locke and Rousseau clearly pronounced the sovereignty of the general populace. A great intellectual leap occurred when attributes such as rationality, a sense of purpose, self-consciousness, and volition were simultaneously applied to individuals and mass publics alike. Only by first existing as a self-conscious public can a group of people engage in a social

contract designed to achieve the public good.

Beyond the shared idea of a politically conscious public, Locke and Rousseau advanced radically different conceptions of the role of publics. These differences define the main lines of cleavage in democratic theory. The public envisioned by Locke was held to a more constrained political role than that proposed by Rousseau. For Locke, the aim of civil society was to preserve the positive aspects of the state of nature (i.e., freedom, equality and liberty), while erecting a mechanism through which individual property rights could be protected from the capricious exercise of power. In Lockean civil society, political power rested ultimately with the people. However, the exercise of sovereignty was limited to particular instances in which the public no longer felt that government was pursuing its designated end: the public good. Locke indicated that after "a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices" by civil leaders, the public could take back the authority it had granted and reformulate politics to suit its will.²

Rousseau's general will, on the other hand, was omnipresent and omnipotent. Instead of appearing periodically to correct abuses of power, the general will was a constant expression of social direction: "As nature gives each man absolute power over all his members, the social compact gives the body politic absolute power over all its members also; and it is this power which, under the direction of the general will, bears...the name of Sovereignty".³

In sum, Locke posited a public composed of individuals seeking to protect their mutual interests, while Rousseau emphasized the interest of the collective will. Locke's public exerted its sovereignty only when required to reorient civil society in a fundamental way. Rousseau's general will subsumed individual preferences, presumably on all matters of political and moral interest.

Forces That Changed Enlightenment Ideals

Important philosophical and technological changes have rendered the conceptions of the public offered by Locke and Rousseau ill-suited to modern practice. And yet neither ideal is unintelligible to a modern audience versed in the language of survey research. This requires some explanation.

The American political tradition has borrowed elements of Rousseau's public and combined them with the Lockean ideal. The communitarian nature of the general will has been de-emphasized in favor of the liberal individualism that follows from Locke. On the other hand, the ever-present status of the general will fits the American political tradition better than the idea of a deferential public. The combination produces a politically vigilant brand of liberal individualism, resulting in a public that paradoxically insists on directing many aspects of social, political and moral life, within the context of individual preference. Europeans often marvel at the disjunction between our individualist rhetoric and our communitarian actions.

In addition to the philosophical transformation, there have been tangible evolutions in society since the eighteenth century. Certainly technological advances and the Industrial Revolution played key roles in altering our notions of the public and of public opinion. The Industrial Revolution created the prerequisites for a true public: mass education, a sufficient level of prosperity, communications systems, and so forth. Moreover, these same factors eventually made it possible to tap individual opinion by means of polls.

It was the combination of liberal individualism with the possibilities opened up by technology that shaped our current understanding of public opinion. The individual has become empowered by the philosophy and technology of the modern era. Polling becomes a natural phenomenon when a true mass public is joined

with a liberal individualist political philosophy. Of course, ours is but one among several modern adaptations of earlier ideas of public opinion. A public operating in an illiberal, non-individualist political environment has a natural disdain for polling. In extreme cases, such societies rely instead on the collective will expressed in the Party or the Führer. "The NSDAP," Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "should not become a constable of public opinion, but must dominate it."

Polling and the Transformation of Publics and Public Opinion

Ironically, the same factors that helped fulfill the theoretical publics envisioned by political writers such as Rousseau and Locke also created a dynamic that made the modern treatment of public opinion distinct from both strands of Enlightenment thought. For Locke, the opinions of individuals mattered as a means of social cohesion, but he never anticipated day to day opinions on public policy. Political sovereignty consisted of granting political authority until such time as that authority failed to protect and promote the people's rights. The public delegated; it did not govern. The direct democracy assumptions on which polling is based are foreign to Lockeanism. Consequently, the idea of politically relevant survey questions posed to an attentive public is confounding to Lockean ideals of social and political power.

The Roper Center, built upon the ideas of modern survey research, would be alien to Rousseau as well, due not only to its technology, but also to its conception of public opinion. Modern polling samples individuals and then aggregates their opinions. Rousseau, in sharp contrast, collectivized individuals into a general will and saw that collective will as something far more substantial than a mere sum of individual opinions. Rousseau would have great qualms about the whole exercise of our present-day opinion polling: Atomizing the public at a brief moment in time and adding up its responses to a set of structured questions yields, he would certainly have felt had he ever viewed the exercise, something not to be taken as the real collective judgment of a people.

I am not arguing that Rousseau's sense of public opinion and how it becomes manifest is superior to our own. It presents all kinds of problems, not the least of which is that its almost mystical sense of a "will of all" seems to invite—as critics have often noted—trips into totalitarian exploitation.

Still, critics of the emerging polling business had a point in drawing on elements in Enlightenment ideas of public opinion to argue that polling—for all its claims to "science"—had intellectual flaws. Herbert Blumer once wrote that "the mere fact that the interviewee either gives or does not give an opinion does not tell you whether he is participating in the

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formation of public opinion as it is being built up functionally in the society."⁴ Blumer's comments were part of a severe criticism which argued that polling simply was not able to study public opinion as it actually existed. One need not subscribe in full to Blumer's argument in order to share his unease with the difference between survey public opinion and societal public opinion—the former being a slightly blurred snapshot and the latter recognized as an on-going socio-psychological and political process. Put baldly, it is the difference between a mathematical aggregation of individual responses to specific questions and the organic general will of Rousseau.

This examination serves to highlight an intellectual dilemma. On the one hand,

we know that public opinion polls have been remarkably successful. If ubiquity is a measure of performance, polls have indeed scored well. Average citizens, journalists, social scientists and politicians use polls to understand our social condition and convey information about attitudes on a variety of socio-political topics. The survey business has also performed well as indicated by its ability to find a home in diverse political environments. Polls may even be an *essential* part of the decision-making processes of any modern day democracy, or country groping toward greater recognition of individual rights and interests.

On the other hand, we must recognize that polls represent a particular species of understanding, having been nurtured on an historically unusual diet of political philosophy and technological development. They run the constant risk of overestimating the extent to which general publics participate in much of day-to-day deliberations—as opposed to long-term direction setting—that go into policy making. And they often underestimate the variegated depth and structure of public sentiment as it actually exists in a complex society.

Endnotes

¹Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 80.

²John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980), Section 225.

³Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1973), Book II, Chapter 4.

⁴Herbert Blumer, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review* (1948), p. 545.

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