

# THE LITERATURE: *Classics Revisited*

From Herbert Blumer, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review*, 1948, pp. 542-554.

**Editor's note:** The early years of public opinion research were marked by a lively and sometimes rancorous debate over the fundamental properties of public opinion and what these require of the polling enterprise. Sociologist Herbert Blumer was invited to address these questions at the December 1947 ASS meeting—yes, it was the American Sociological Society in those less acronymically obsessed days. Discussants Theodore Newcomb and Julian Woodward strongly dissented from Blumer's assessment. THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE thinks this early debate needs to be renewed.

Note that Blumer means by "sampling procedure" something very different from what we now understand. He argues that people differ greatly in how much knowledge and interest they have on the various public issues, how intensely they hold their views, and how prepared they are to advance these views in the real political world beyond opinion polls. Few would disagree. But Blumer insists that these factors produce enormous difficulty for opinion research, which had not been adequately addressed. His criticism of "sampling procedure" is an insistence that the unweighted tallying of "pro and con" responses simply does not give us "public opinion."

...Admittedly, we do not know a great deal about public opinion. However, we know something. We know enough about public opinion from empirical observations to form a few reasonably reliable judgments about its nature and mode of functioning. In addition, we can make some reasonably secure inferences about the structure and functioning of our society and about collective behavior within our society. This combined body of knowledge derived partly from direct empirical observation and partly from reasonable inference can serve appropriately as means of judging and assessing current public opinion polling as a device for studying public opinion....

In my judgment the inherent deficiency of public opinion polling, certainly as currently done, is contained in its sampling procedure. Its current sampling procedure forces a treatment of society as if society were only an aggregation of disparate individuals. Public opinion, in turn, is regarded as being a quantitative distribution of individual opinions. This way of treating society and this way of viewing

public opinion must be regarded as markedly unrealistic....We do not know at all whether individuals in the sample represent that portion of structured society that is participating in the formation of public opinion on a given issue. That the sample will catch a number of them, or even a larger number of them is very likely. But, as far as I am able to determine, there is no way in current public opinion polling to know much about this. Certainly the mere fact that the interviewee either gives or does not give an opinion does not tell you whether he is participating in the formation of public opinion as it is being built up functionally in the society....

In short, we know essentially nothing of the individual in the sample with reference to the significance of him or of his opinion in the public opinion that is being built up or which is expressing itself functionally in the operation of society. We do not know whether the individual has the position of an archbishop or an itinerant laborer; whether he belongs to a powerful group taking a vigorous stand on the issue or whether he is a de-

tached recluse with no membership in a functional group; whether he is bringing his opinion to bear in some fashion at strategic points in the operation of society or whether it is isolated and socially impotent. We do not know what role, if any, any individual in the sample plays in the formation of the public opinion on which he is questioned, and we do not know what part, if any, his opinion as given has in the functional public opinion which exists with reference to the issue....

What I have said will appear to many as distinctly invalid on the ground that public opinion polling has demonstrated that it can and does detect public opinion faithfully, by virtue of its marked success in predicting election returns....What I think needs to be noted is that the casting of ballots is distinctly an action of separate individuals wherein a ballot cast by one individual has exactly the same weight as a ballot cast by another individual. In this proper sense, and in the sense of real action, voters constitute a population of disparate individuals, each of whom has equal

weight to the others. Consequently, the sampling procedure which is based on a population of disparate individuals is eminently suited to securing a picture of what the voting is likely to be. However, to regard the successful use of polling in this area as proof of its automatic validity when applied to an area where people do not act as equally weighted disparate individuals begs the very question under consideration....

There is a very important contention in this connection which has to be considered. The contention can be stated as follows:

An election by public ballot is in itself an expression of public opinion—and, furthermore, it is effective and decisive expression of public opinion. It is, in fact, the ultimate expression of public opinion and thus it represents the proper norm of the expression of public opinion. In the election by ballot each voter, in accordance with the basic principles of democracy, has his say as a citizen and has equal worth to every other citizen in casting his ballot....Accordingly, public opinion polling, in itself, can be used as a type of referendum to record and measure the true opinion of the public on issues in the instances of which the public does not go to the election polls....

It should be evident on analysis that the contention is actually a normative plea and not a defense of polling as a method of study of public opinion as such public opinion functions in our society. The contention proposes that public opinion be construed in a particular way, to wit, that public opinion ought to be an aggregation of the opinions of a cross section of the population rather than what it is in the actual functioning of society....It is sufficient to note that if one seeks to justify polling as a method of studying public opinion on the ground that the composition of public opinion ought to be different than what it is, he is not establishing the validity of the method for the study of the empirical world as it is. Instead, he is hanging on the coat-tails of a dubious proposal for social reform....

As far as I can ascertain, Professors Woodward and Newcomb regard current public opinion polling as operating with a conception of public opinion that is as tenable as any alterna-

tive conception. Thus, they seem to regard my criticism as having no value in that it is merely the application of a different conception of public opinion—a conception which has no preferential status. To my mind, however, the problem is precisely one of whether one proposes to study public opinion with a conception that is true to its empirical character or whether one proposes to study it with a conception which is patently unrealistic. I submit that current public opinion polling necessarily operates with a conception of public opinion that is a gross distortion. By virtue of its sampling procedure, current public opinion polling is forced to regard public opinion as an aggregate of equally weighted opinions of disparate individuals. To any one who has the slightest realistic knowledge of our society or the barest acquaintance with empirical instances of public opinion such a conception must appear as an untenable fiction....

\*I refer to such a program as dubious because I believe the much needed improvement of public opinion in our society should be in the process by which public opinion organically functions, i.e., by arousing, organizing, and effectively directing the opinion of people who appreciate that they have an interest in a given issue. A reliance, instead, on a mere "referendum" by an undifferentiated mass, having great segments of indifference and non-participation, is unlikely to offer a desirable public opinion. At the best, in my judgment, such a "referendum" could operate as a corrective supplement and not as a substitute.

