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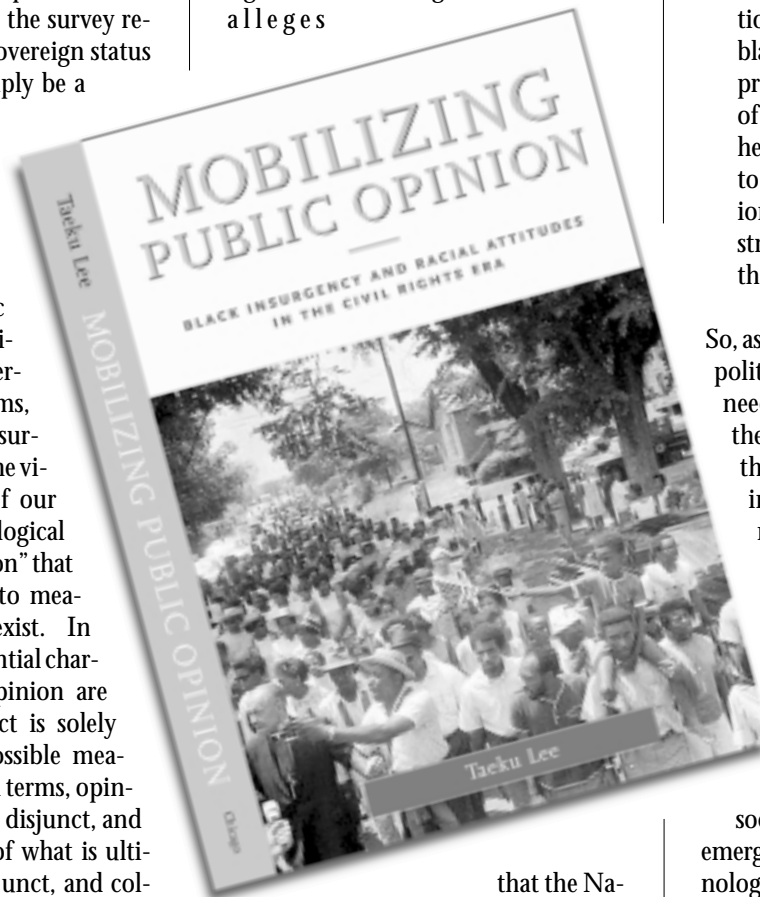
An excerpt from MOBILIZING PUBLIC OPINION
By Taeku Lee

The Limits of Sovereignty

The fact that opinion scholars almost exclusively use poll data does not in itself undermine the survey research program. The sovereign status of survey data may simply be a fortuitous historical contingency or, more forcefully, an outcome warranted by the simple fact that polls are the optimal way to measure public opinion. That said, criticisms of opinion polls persist.... In normative terms, the sovereign status of survey research threatens the vitality and autonomy of our political life. In ontological terms, the “public opinion” that opinion polls purport to measure simply does not exist. In more general form, essential characteristics of public opinion are lost when the construct is solely identified with one possible measure of it. In conceptual terms, opinion polls render a static, disjunct, and individualistic notion of what is ultimately a dynamic, conjunct, and collective phenomenon.

To begin, critics of survey research note that polls are far from a neutral mirror of society and that their historical origins and present-day dominion pose a sobering threat to fair democratic representation. Jürgen Habermas and Benjamin Ginsberg, for example, attribute the ascendance of survey research to the bureaucratic necessity of political states to “domesticate” the sentiments of their electorate. In doing so, the argument goes, such states effectively “manufacture” legitimacy

and consent that might otherwise not exist. Ginsberg further argues that opinion polling is thus an instrument of political control, made powerful by the aura of objectivity and political neutrality conferred upon it by the public and politicians alike. For instance, in the context of the civil rights era, Ginsberg alleges



that the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders—which conducted some of the first surveys to focus on African American mass opinion—effectively used the results of their polling to manipulate public opinion and avoid any costly acquiescence to the demands of blacks in urban America. Ginsberg notes [in his 1986 book, *The Captive Public*] that

[t]hese surveys allowed the commission to identify a number of attitudes held by blacks that were said to have contributed to

their disruptive behavior. As a result of its surveys, the commission was able to suggest several programs that might modify these attitudes and thus prevent further disorder. Significantly enough, the Riot Commission’s report did not call for changes in the institutions and policies about which blacks had been violently expressing their views. The effect of polling was, in essence, to help the government find a way to *not* accommodate the opinions blacks had expressed in the streets of the urban ghettos of the United States.

So, as Ginsberg’s argument goes, when political actors or organized interests need to delegitimize political claims they oppose, opinion polls afford them a “democratic” means of doing so by molding public sentiment accordingly.

James Beniger further implicates the logic of technological change in what he calls “the Control Revolution,” in which change is driven by and reinforces the need for information processing and social control. Opinion polls thus emerge as merely another “control technology.” In particular, Beniger sees polls as a form of “market feedback technology” used to gather information to shape and influence mass consumption. Softer shades of such sentiments, of course, can be found in earlier theorists such as James Bryce and Walter Lippmann. Even V.O. Key notes that “[g]overnments must concern themselves with the opinions of their citizens, if only to provide a basis for repression of disaffection.” Hence the same tool that pioneers such as Crossley and Gallup praised as enabling democratic representation can also be seen as undermining it.

More pointedly, other critics question the ability of opinion polls to meaningfully measure public opinion at all. [In a 1948 article published by the *American Sociological Review*], Herbert Blumer, an early and steadfast critic of opinion polls, warns against

the narrow operationalist position that public opinion consists of what public opinion polls poll.... What is logically unpardonable on the part of those who take the narrow operationalist position is for them to hold either wittingly or unwittingly that their investigations are a study of public opinion as this term is conceived in our ordinary discourse.

The fatal flaw, according to Blumer, is that pollsters equate the findings of survey data—merely an instrument used to measure public opinion—with the object of inquiry itself.

Perhaps Blumer's contemporary on this point is the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who makes the deliberately provocative claim that public opinion, in the "sense of the social definition implicitly accepted by those who prepare or analyze or use opinion polls, simply does not exist." Bourdieu indicts survey researchers on three counts of problematic assumption-making: that everyone's opinion is equal; that, on a given issue, everyone actually holds an opinion; and that a consensus exists about what questions merit asking (and, by corollary, that surveys can know what that consensus is). Thus survey data—all other possible caveats notwithstanding—adequately measure mass opinion only if they accurately survey what ordinary individuals are actually thinking about at a given moment.

Finally, the study of public opinion through survey research is impugned by critics because it allegedly captures

only a static, disjunct, cognitively based, individualistic dimension of mass opinion that is at best tenuously linked to political action and social processes. Ginsberg boldly asserts that "polling has contributed to the domestication of opinion by helping to transform it from a politically potent, often disruptive force into a more docile, plebiscitary phenomenon." The evidence on which critics draw to support this claim is that legislators who once relied on a diverse range of expressions of public opinion—local newspapers, visits with their constituents, letters from their districts, and interest groups—were now increasingly looking to opinion polls.

In an analysis of the emergence of the straw poll, Susan Herbst demonstrates that this shift is emblematic of a deeper shift in underlying conceptions of public opinion. In particular, Herbst notes a critical shift from public opinion as the product of groups (especially, political parties) to public opinion as "an aggregation of atomized, anonymous individuals." The paradoxical result is that public opinion ceases to be *public*. As Lynn Sanders observes, "because of the analytic and measurement strategies of survey researchers, public opinion has become literally private and only figuratively public."

M o r e o v e r , Bourdieu argues that politics involves conflicts in which citizens must take sides. Hence Bourdieu distinguishes opinion as measured through polls from opinion that influences political action ("mobilized opinion"), and argues that opinion research should focus on

how individuals' opinions on an issue become mobilized and activated....

The cumulative effect of these critiques is that exclusive reliance on survey data as a measure of public opinion may lead to an impoverished or inaccurate understanding of what public opinion is and what its role in democratic regimes ought to be. The ascendance of survey research is accompanied by a shift in focus from public opinion as the subject of theoretical speculation to public opinion as the object of empirical inquiry. A casualty of this shift is that the normative and conceptual parameters of public opinion largely become presumed, rather than interrogated, to the neglect of alternate parameters of public opinion. And with the growing dominance of opinion polls, pollsters and survey research centers increasingly command authority over the substantive parameters of public opinion as well—over what, when, and how mass opinion is measured, analyzed, and interpreted.

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