

Polling and Transformation of Public Opinion

1. How has the character of public opinion been changed by the widespread use and acceptability of polls? What are the consequences of such changes for democratic government?
2. Why might government engage in polling?
3. How has interest-group politics been affected by the rise of polling? Which groups and elements of society have gained or lost?

Polling and the Transformation of Public Opinion

BENJAMIN GINSBERG

Public opinion is usually seen as flowing from citizens to public officials. This represents an important way for the public to make its wishes and preferences known to decision makers. The increasing use of polls to assess public opinion seems to enhance citizen influence, giving elected officials more to go on as they attempt to respond to their constituents' demands and concerns.

But polls are more than neutral indicators of the public's preferences. According to Benjamin Ginsberg, polling has fundamentally altered the character of public opinion and the relationship between citizens and their government. In his view, polling has made contemporary public opinion less likely to constrain authorities and possibly more subject to government manipulation and control. Rather than responding to public opinion, government may create, distort, or modify it.

Ginsberg believes that public opinion polling has also weakened the impact of certain groups and their leaders in politics, particularly organized labor and working class interests. These groups in the past were closely linked with mass public opinion.

. . . . **M**uch of the prominence of opinion polling as a civic institution derives from the significance that present-day political ideologies ascribe to the will of the people. Polls purport to provide reliable, scientifically derived information about the public's desires, fears,

and beliefs, and so to give concrete expression to the conception of a popular will. The availability of accurate information certainly is no guarantee that governments will actually pay heed to popular opinions. Yet many students and practitioners of survey research have always believed that an accurate picture of the public's views might at least increase the chance that governments' actions would be informed by and responsive to popular sentiment.

Unfortunately, however, polls do more than simply measure and record the natural or spontaneous manifestation of popular belief. The data reported by opinion polls are actually the product of an interplay between opinion and the survey instrument. As they measure, the polls interact with opinion, producing changes in the character and identity of the views receiving public expression. The changes induced by polling, in turn, have the most profound implications for the relationship between public opinion and government. In essence, 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.

Publicizing Opinion

Poll results and public opinion are terms that are used almost synonymously. As one indication of the extent to which public opinion is now identified with the polls, a sophisticated new national magazine entitled *Public Opinion* matter-of-factly devotes virtually all its attention to the presentation and discussion of survey data.

Yet, in spite of this general tendency to equate public opinion with survey results, polling is obviously not the only possible source of knowledge about the public's attitudes. Means of ascertaining public opinion certainly existed prior to the development of modern survey techniques. Statements from local notables and interest group spokespersons, letters to the press and to public officials, and sometimes demonstrations, protests, and riots provided indications of the populace's views long before the invention of the sample survey. Governments certainly took note of all these symptoms of the public's mood. As corporate executive and political commentator Chester Barnard once noted, prior to the availability of polling, legislators "read the local newspapers, toured their districts and talked with voters, received letters from the home state, and entertained delegations which claimed to speak for large and important blocks of voters."¹

Obviously, these alternative modes of assessing public sentiment continue to be available. But it is significant that whenever poll results differ from the interpretation of public opinion offered by some other source,

almost invariably the polls are presumed to be correct. The labor leader whose account of the views of the rank and file differs from the findings of a poll is automatically assumed to have misrepresented or misperceived membership opinion. Politicians who dare to quarrel with polls' negative assessments of their popularity or that of their programs are immediately derided by the press.

This presumption in favor of opinion polls stems from both their scientific and their representative character. Survey research is modeled after the methodology of the natural sciences and at least conveys an impression of technical sophistication and scientific objectivity. . . .

At the same time, polls can also claim to offer a more representative view of popular sentiment than any alternative source of information. Group spokesmen sometimes speak only for themselves. The distribution of opinion reflected by letters to newspapers and public officials is notoriously biased. Demonstrators and rioters, however sincere, are seldom more than a tiny and unrepresentative segment of the populace. Polls, by contrast, at least attempt to take equal account of all relevant individuals. And, indeed, by offering a representative view of public opinion, polls have often served as antidotes for false spokesmen and as guides to popular concerns that might never have been mentioned by individuals writing letters to legislators or newspaper editors.

Nevertheless, polling does more than just offer a scientifically derived and representative account of popular sentiment. The substitution of polling for other means of gauging the public's views also has the effect of changing several of the key characteristics of public opinion. Critics of survey research have often noted that polling can affect both the beliefs of individuals asked to respond to survey questions and the attitudes of those who subsequently read a survey's results. However, the most important aspect of polls is not their capacity to change individuals' beliefs. Rather the major impact of polling is the way polls cumulate and translate individuals' private beliefs into collective public opinions. . . .

Four fundamental changes in the character of public opinion can be traced directly to the introduction of survey research. First, polling alters both what is expressed and what is perceived as the opinion of the mass public by transforming public opinion from a voluntary to an externally subsidized matter. Second, polling modifies the manner in which opinion is publicly presented by transforming public opinion from a behavioral to an attitudinal phenomenon. Third, polling changes the origin of information about public beliefs by transforming public opinion from a property of groups to an attribute of individuals. Finally, polling partially removes individuals' control over their own public expressions of opinion by transforming public opinion from a spontaneous assertion to a constrained response.

. . . These four transformations have contributed markedly to the domestication or pacification of public opinion. Polling has rendered public opinion less dangerous, less disruptive, more permissive, and, perhaps, more amenable to governmental control.

From Voluntarism to Subsidy

In the absence of polling, the cost and effort required to organize and publicly communicate an opinion are normally borne by one or more of the individuals holding the opinion. Someone wishing to express a view about civil rights, for example, might write a letter, deliver a speech, contribute to an organization, or join a protest march. A wealthy individual might employ a public relations expert; a politically astute individual might assert that he or she represented the views of many others. But whatever the means, the organization and public communication of opinion would entail a voluntary expenditure of funds, effort, or time by the opinion holder. Polls, by contrast, organize and publicize opinion without requiring initiative or action on the part of individuals. With the exception of the small sample asked to submit to an interview, the individuals whose opinions are expressed through polls need take no action whatsoever. Polls underwrite or subsidize the costs of eliciting, organizing, and publicly expressing opinion.

This displacement of costs from the opinion holder to the polling agency has important consequences for the character of the opinions likely to receive public expression. In general, the willingness of individuals to bear the cost of publicly asserting their views is closely tied to the intensity with which they hold those views. Other things being equal, individuals with strong feelings about any given matter are more likely to invest whatever time and effort are needed to make their feelings known than are persons with less intense views. One seldom hears, for example, of a march on Washington by groups professing not to care much about abortion. As this example suggests, moreover, individuals with strongly held views are also more likely than their less zealous fellow citizens to be found at the extremes of opinion on any given question. Thus as long as the costs of asserting opinions are borne by opinion holders themselves, those with relatively extreme viewpoints are also disproportionately likely to bring their views to the public forum.

Polls weaken this relationship between the public expression of opinion and the intensity or extremity of opinion. The assertion of an opinion through a poll requires little effort. As a result, the beliefs of those who care relatively little or even hardly at all are as likely to be publicized as the opinions of those who care a great deal about the matter in question. The upshot is that the distribution of public opinion reported by polls

generally differs considerably from the distribution that emerges from forms of public communication initiated by citizens. Political scientists Aage Clausen, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and others have shown that the public opinion reported by surveys is, on the aggregate, both less intense and less extreme than the public opinion that would be defined by voluntary modes of popular expression. Similarly, poll respondents typically include a much larger proportion of individuals who "don't know," "don't care," or exhibit some other form of relative detachment from the debate on major public issues than the population of activists willing to express their views through voluntary or spontaneous means.

. . . Polls, in effect, submerge individuals with strongly held views in a more apathetic mass public. The data reported by polls are likely to suggest to public officials that they are working in a more permissive climate of opinion than might have been thought on the basis of alternative indicators of the popular mood. A government wishing to maintain some semblance of responsiveness to public opinion would typically find it less difficult to comply with the preferences reported by polls than to obey the opinion that might be inferred from letters, strikes, or protests. Indeed, relative to these other modes of public expression, polled opinion could be characterized as a collective statement of permission.

Certainly, even in the era of polling, voluntary expressions of public opinion can still count heavily. In recent years, for example, members of Congress were impressed by calls, letters, and telegrams from constituents—and threats from contributors—regarding President Reagan's various tax reform proposals. Groups like the National Rifle Association are masters in the use of this type of campaign. Nevertheless, contradiction by polls tends to reduce the weight and credibility of other sources of public opinion, an effect that can actually help governments to resist the pressure of constituent opinion. Constituency polls, for example, are often used by legislators as a basis for resisting the demands of political activists and pressure groups in their districts. . . .

The relatively permissive character of polled opinion can provide a government faced with demonstrations, protests, and other manifestations of public hostility a basis for claiming that its policies are compatible with true public opinion and opposed only by an unrepresentative group of activist malcontents.

A good illustration of how polls can play this role is the case of the "silent majority" on whose behalf Richard Nixon claimed to govern.* The

* Members of the "silent majority" were those respondents in the national public opinion polls who disapproved of the protests and demonstrations against the Vietnam War. They composed

silent majority was the Nixon administration's answer to the protestors, demonstrators, rioters, and other critics who demanded major changes in American foreign and domestic policies. Administration spokespersons frequently cited poll data, often drawing on Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg's influential treatise, *The Real Majority*, to question the popular standing of the activist opposition. According to the administration's interpretation, its activist opponents did not represent the views of the vast majority of "silent" Americans who could be found in the polls but not on picket lines or marches, or in civil disturbances.

Undoubtedly a majority of Americans were less than sympathetic to the protestors. But from the administration's perspective, the real virtue of the silent majority was precisely its silence. Many of those Americans who remained silent did so because they lacked strong opinions on the political issues of the day. The use of polls to identify a "silent majority" was a means of diluting the political weight and undermining the credibility of those members of the public with the strongest views while constructing a permissive majority of "silent" Americans. . . .

Another illustration of the permissive character of polled opinion is Lyndon Johnson's reaction to public opinion surveys about the Vietnam war. Johnson constantly referred to the polls in his attempt to convince friends, visitors, colleagues, and most of all himself that the public supported his war policies. Indeed, Johnson's eventual realization that public opinion had turned against his administration weighed heavily in his decision not to seek another term in office. The significance of this case is that polls permitted a president who was apparently actually concerned with his administration's responsiveness to public opinion to believe that he was doing what the people wanted. The polls appeared to indicate that despite the contrary assertions of protestors, demonstrators, and rioters, public opinion did not really demand an end to the war. After all, it was not until late in Johnson's term that a majority of those polled disapproved of his policies. In effect, the polls permitted a public official who had some actual desire to be responsive to public opinion to more easily convince himself that he had been.

From Behavior to Attitude

Prior to the advent of polling, public opinion could often only be inferred from political behavior. Before the availability of voter survey data, for example, analysts typically sought to deduce electoral opinion from voting patterns, attributing candidates' electoral fortunes to whatever character-

an overwhelming majority of the electorate, but their disapproval of the protestors deflected attention from the fact that many of them did not approve of government policy on the war.

istics of the public mood could be derived from election returns. Often population movements served as the bases for conclusions about public preferences. Even in recent years the movement of white urbanites to the metropolitan fringe, dubbed "white flight," has been seen as a key indicator of white attitudes toward racial integration. Especially in the case of the least articulate segments of the population, governments before the advent of polls often had little or no knowledge of the public mood until opinion manifested itself in some form of behavior. Generally this meant violent or disruptive activity.

In the modern era public opinion is synonymous with polls. But certainly through the nineteenth century, public opinion was usually equated with riots, strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts. Nineteenth-century public sentiment could sometimes reveal itself through the most curious forms of behavior. In London during the 1830s, for example, a favorite mechanism for the expression of popular opinion was the "illumination." In an "illumination" those espousing a particular point of view placed lanterns or candles in their windows. Often mobs went from house to house demanding that the occupants "illuminate." Householders who declined might have their windows smashed and dwelling sacked. On April 27, 1831, a large mob formed to demand electoral reform. According to a contemporary account:

On that evening, the illumination was pretty general. . . . The mobs did a great deal of mischief. A numerous rabble proceeded along the Strand, destroying all windows that were not lighted. . . . In St. James' Square they broke the windows in the houses of the Bishop of London, the Marquis of Cleveland and Lord Grantham. The Bishop of Winchester and Mr. W. W. Wynn, seeing the mob approach, placed candles in their windows, which thus escaped. The mob then proceeded to St. James Street where they broke the windows of Crockford's, Jordon's, the Guards, and other Club houses. They next went to the Duke of Wellington's residence in Piccadilly, and discharged a shower of stones which broke several windows. The Duke's servants fired out of the windows over their heads to frighten them, but without effect. The policemen then informed the mob that the corpse of the Duchess of Wellington was on the premises, which arrested further violence against Apsley House.²

. . . The advent of polling transformed public opinion from a behavioral to an attitudinal phenomenon. Polls elicit, organize, and publicize opinion without requiring any action on the part of the opinion holder. Of course, public presentation of an opinion via polls by no means precludes its subsequent expression through behavior. Nevertheless, polling does permit any interested party an opportunity to assess the state of the public's mood without having to wait for some behavioral manifestation. From the perspective of political elites, the obvious virtue of polls is that they make it possible to recognize and deal with popular attitudes—even the attitudes of the most inarticulate segments of the populace—before they materialize

in some unpleasant, disruptive, or threatening form of political action. In democracies, of course, the most routine behavioral threat posed by public opinion is hostile action in the voting booth, and polling has become one of the chief means of democratic political elites to attempt to anticipate and avert the electorate's displeasure. But in both democratic and dictatorial contexts, governments have also employed polling extensively to help forestall the possibility of popular disobedience and unrest.

In recent years, for example, many Eastern European regimes have instituted survey programs. Polling has been used, in part, to forewarn the leadership of potential sources of popular disaffection, hostility, or antigovernment activities. As sociologist Bogdan Osolnik observed, in Eastern Europe opinion research provides "a warning that some attitudes which political actors consider to be generally accepted . . . have not yet been adopted by public opinion." Such "misunderstandings," says Osolnik, "can be extremely harmful—and dangerous."³ Polling allows the regime an opportunity to resolve these potential "misunderstandings" before they pose a serious threat.

As early as the 1950s, to cite one concrete case, the Polish government obtained extensive survey data indicating that strong religious sentiment was widespread among the young. The regime became quite concerned with the implications of the continuing hold of "unorthodox ritualistic attitudes" on the generation that was expected to possess the strongest commitment to socialism. In response to its survey findings, the government embarked on a major program of antireligious and ideological indoctrination aimed at young people. . . .

Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler is reputed to have carefully studied polls of German attitudes toward the Nazi regime and its policies. Apparently, whenever he noted that some of those surveyed failed to respond with the appropriate opinions, he demanded to know their names.

In the United States, polling has typically been used as an adjunct to policy implementation. Polling can provide administrators with some idea of what citizens are and are not likely to tolerate and, thus, help them to avoid popular disobedience and resistance. As early as the 1930s, federal agencies began to poll extensively. During that decade the United States Department of Agriculture established a Division of Program Surveys to undertake studies of attitudes toward federal farm programs. At the same time, extensive use was made of surveys by the Works Progress Administration, the Social Security Administration, and the Public Health Service. . . .

Nor is polling by U.S. governmental agencies confined to the domestic policy arena. Various units of the State Department and other foreign policy agencies have engaged in extensive polling abroad to assess the likely response of citizens of other nations to American foreign policy initiatives aimed at them. During the era of American involvement in Vietnam, both the Defense Department and the Agency for International

Development sponsored extensive polling in that country to examine the effects of existing and proposed American programs. Similarly, polling was conducted in Cuba and the Dominican Republic to assess likely popular reaction to contemplated American intervention. A good deal of polling has also been sponsored in Europe by American governmental agencies concerned with European reactions to American propaganda appeals. . . .

Let me emphasize again that even the most extensive and skillful use of polling does not ensure that public opinion will manifest itself only attitudinally. Behavioral expressions of opinion in the form of protests, riots, strikes, and so on are common enough even in the era of survey research. . . .

In some instances, of course, the knowledge of popular attitudes gleaned from polls may convince those in power simply to bow to the popular will before it is too late. Such a response would **certainly** be consistent with the hopes expressed by polling advocates. Yet often enough the effect of polling is to lessen the threat or pressure that public opinion is likely to impose on administrators and policy makers. By converting opinion from a behavioral to an attitudinal phenomenon, polling is, in effect, also transforming public opinion into a less immediately threatening and dangerous phenomenon.

Polls can, however, also give a government a better opportunity to manipulate and modify public opinion and thus to avoid accommodation to citizens' preferences. One interesting recent example of this process is the activity of the 1965 American "Riot Commission." Charged with the task of preventing repetitions of the riots that rocked American cities during the 1960s, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders sponsored and reviewed a large number of surveys of black attitudes on a variety of political, social, and economic questions. These 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.

From Group to Individual

Mass behavior was not the sole source of information about popular opinion prior to the advent of polling. Reports on the public's mood could usually also be obtained from the activists, leaders, or notables of the

nation's **organized and communal** groups. Public officials or others interested in the views of **working people**, for example, would typically consult **trade union officers**. Similarly, anyone concerned with the attitudes of, say, **farmers** would turn to the heads of farm organizations. Of course, **interest-group leaders, party leaders**, and social notables seldom waited to be asked. These **worthies** would—and still do—voluntarily step forward to offer their impressions of **membership opinion**. While such impressions might not always be **fully accurate**, certainly group, party, and communal leaders often do **have better opportunities** to meet with and listen to their adherents than would be available to outsiders. Before the invention of **polling** these leaders quite probably possessed the most reliable data available on their followers' views. In the absence of contradictory evidence, at least, the claims of these leaders to have special knowledge of some **portion** of public opinion were strong enough to help give them a good deal of influence in national affairs. . . .

The advent of polling transformed public opinion from a property of groups to an attribute of individuals. Opinion surveys can elicit the views of individual citizens directly, allowing governments to bypass putative spokespersons for public opinion. Polls have never fully supplanted communal and interest-group leaders as sources of information about popular attitudes. Yet they do lessen the need for such intermediaries by permitting whatever agencies or organizations are interested in learning the public's views to establish their own links with opinion holders. At the same time, polling often undermines the claims of group leaders and activists to speak for membership opinion. Frequently enough, polls seem to uncover discrepancies between the claims of leaders or self-appointed spokespersons on the one hand, and the opinions of the mass publics whose views these activists claim to reflect on the other. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s opponents of the American antiwar movement often took heart from poll data apparently indicating that youthful antiwar protestors who claimed to speak for "young people" really did not. Some poll data, at least, suggested that on the average individuals under thirty years of age were even more "hawkish" than respondents over the age of fifty.

This conversion of public opinion from a property of groups and their leaders to a more direct presentation of popular preferences has several consequences. On the one hand, polls undoubtedly provide a somewhat more representative picture of the public's views than would usually be obtained from group leaders and notables, who sometimes carelessly or deliberately misrepresent their adherents' opinions. Even with the best of intentions, the leaders of a group may be insufficiently sensitive to the inevitable disparity of viewpoints between activists and ordinary citizens and simply assume that their followers' views are merely echoes of their own. Polling can be a useful antidote to inaccuracy as well as to mendacity.

At the same time, however, by undermining the capacity of groups, interests, parties, and the like to speak for public opinion, polling can also

diminish the effectiveness of public opinion as a force in political affairs. In essence, polling intervenes between opinion and its organized or collective expression. Though they may sometimes distort member opinion, organized groups, interests, and parties remain the most effective mechanisms through which opinion can be made to have an impact on government and politics. Polls' transformation of public opinion into an attribute of individuals increases the accuracy but very likely reduces the general efficacy with which mass opinion is publicly asserted.

Consider the role of labor unions during the Nixon era. Many of the Nixon administration's policies—wage and price controls in particular—were strongly opposed by organized labor. Yet polls constantly undercut the capacity of labor leaders to oppose the programs or to threaten electoral reprisals against legislators who supported it. Poll data seemed generally to suggest that Nixon was personally popular with union members and that most of the rank and file had no strong views on the programs that troubled the unions' leadership. As a result, the administration came to feel that it was reasonably safe to ignore the importunities of organized labor on a host of public issues. By enhancing the visibility of the opinions of ordinary workers, the polls surely drew a more representative picture of working-class opinion than had been offered by union officials. Yet the real cost of this more fully representative account of workers' views was, in a sense, a diminution of organized labor's influence over policy. . . .

Historically, the introduction of polling was, in fact, most damaging to the political fortunes of the groups that represented the interests and aspirations of the working classes. Polling erodes one of the major competitive advantages that has traditionally been available to lower-class groups and parties—a knowledge of mass public opinion superior to that of their middle- and upper-class opponents. The inability of bourgeois politicians to understand or sympathize with the needs of ordinary people is, of course, the point of one of the favorite morality tales of American political folklore, the misadventures of the "silk-stocking" candidate. To cite just one example, during the New York City mayoral race of 1894, the Committee of Seventy, a group that included the city's socially most prominent citizens, argued vehemently for improvements in the city's baths and lavatories, "to promote cleanliness and increased public comfort." The committee's members seemed undisturbed by the fact that the city and nation in 1894 were in the grip of a severe economic downturn accompanied by unusually high unemployment and considerable distress and misery among the working classes. The Committee of Seventy did not receive the thanks of many working-class New Yorkers for its firm stand on the lavatory issue.

Simply as a matter of social proximity, working-class parties or associations may have better access to mass opinion than is readily available to their rivals from the upper end of the social spectrum. As one Chicago precinct captain told University of Chicago political scientist Harold Gos-

nell during the 1930s, ". . . you think you can come in here and help the poor. You can't even talk to them on their own level, because you're better, you're from the University. I never graduated from high school, and I'm one of them."

Even more important than social proximity, however, is the matter of organization. In general, groups and parties that appeal mainly to working-class constituencies rely more heavily than their middle- and upper-class rivals on organizational strength and coherence. Organization has typically been the strategy of groups that must cumulate the collective energies of large numbers of individuals to counter their opponents' superior material means or institutional standing. In the course of both American and European political history, for example, disciplined and coherent party organizations were generally developed first by groups representing the working classes. . . .

What is important here is that their relatively coherent and disciplined mass organizations gave parties of the left a more accurate and extensive view of the public's mood than could normally be acquired by their less well organized opponents. . . . In the United States, the urban political machines that mobilized workingclass constituencies employed armies of precinct workers and canvassers who were responsible for learning the preferences, wants, and needs of each and every voter living within an assigned precinct or election district. A Chicago machine precinct captain interviewed by Gosnell, for example, "thought that the main thing was to meet and talk to the voters on a man-to-man basis. . . . It did not matter where the voters were met—in the ball park, on the rinks, at dances, or at the bar. The main thing was to meet them." Through its extensive precinct organization, the urban machine developed a capacity to understand the moods and thus to anticipate and influence the actions of hundreds of thousands of voters.

The advent of polling eroded the advantage that social proximity and organization had given working-class parties in the competition for mass electoral support. Of course, any sort of political group can use an opinion survey. Polls are especially useful to carpetbaggers of all political stripes as a means of scouting what may be new and foreign territory. . . .*

In the United States, where systematic political polling was initiated during the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the early polls were sponsored by newspapers and magazines affiliated with conservative

* *Carpetbagger* is a term that was originally applied to northerners who moved to the South to make money during Reconstruction, after the Civil War. Hostile southerners believed that they stuffed everything they owned into a suitcase, or carpetbag. Today the term is used to describe any opportunistic people who try to exert power or influence in places they do not belong.

causes and middle- and upper-class political factions. Thus the conservative *Chicago Tribune* was a major promoter of the polls during this period. Prior to the critical election of 1896, the *Tribune* polled some 14,000 factory workers and purported to show that 80 percent favored McKinley over William Jennings Bryan. Many of the newspapers and periodicals that made extensive use of political polling at that time were linked with either the Mugwumps or the Prohibitionists—precisely the two political groupings whose members might be least expected to have much firsthand knowledge of the preferences of common folk.* During the 1896 campaign the Mugwump *Chicago Record* spent more than \$60,000 to mail postcard ballots to a random sample of one voter in eight in twelve midwestern states. An additional 328,000 ballots went to all registered voters in Chicago. The Democrats feared that the *Record* poll was a Republican trick and urged their supporters not to participate. . . .

This affiliation of many of the major polls with groups on the political right continued through the early years of the twentieth century. The Hearst newspapers, for example, polled extensively. *Fortune* magazine published widely read polls. The *Literary Digest*, which sponsored a famous presidential poll, was affiliated with the Prohibitionists. The clientele of most of the major pre-World War II pollsters—George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Claude Robinson, for example—was heavily Republican, reflecting both the personal predilections of the pollsters and relative capacities of Democrats and Republicans of the period to understand public opinion without the aid of complex statistical analysis. In recent years the use of political polling has become virtually universal. Nevertheless, the polling efforts and uses of other forms of modern political technology by groups on the political right have been far more elaborate and extensive than those of other political factions. . . .

At the present time, polling is used by parties and candidates of every political stripe in the United States and all the European democracies. Opinion surveys are hardly a monopoly of the political right. Yet the fact remains that in the absence of polling, parties and groups representing the working classes would normally reap the political advantage of a superior knowledge of public opinion. The irony of polling is that the

* *Mugwump*, an Indian word meaning "chief," was used to label Republicans who refused to support James Blaine, the Republican presidential nominee in 1884, because they believed him to be opposed to many governmental reforms. Many came from wealthy, elitist backgrounds and were critical of patronage politics and political machines. Because the Mugwumps voted for Democrat Grover Cleveland, the term is sometimes used to describe individuals who leave their party when they are not pleased with a nominee. Prohibitionists were interested in banning the legal sale and consumption of alcohol. Since drinking was often associated with urban ethnic groups, Prohibitionists were considered to be hostile to lower- and working-class interests.

development of scientific means of measuring public opinion had its most negative effect on precisely those groups whose political fortunes were historically most closely linked with mass public opinion.

From Assertion to Response

In the absence of polling, individuals typically choose for themselves the subjects of any public assertions they might care to make. Those persons or groups willing to expend the funds, effort, or time needed to acquire a public platform normally also select the agenda or topics on which their views will be aired. The individual writing an angry letter to a newspaper or legislator generally singles out the object of his or her scorn. The organizers of a protest march typically define the aim of their own wrath. . . .

The introduction of opinion surveys certainly did not foreclose opportunities for individuals to proffer opinions on topics of their own choosing. Indeed, in the United States a multitude of organizations, groups, and individuals are continually stepping forward to present the most extraordinary notions. Nevertheless, polls elicit subjects' views on questions that have been selected by an external agency—the survey's sponsors—rather than by the respondents themselves. Polling thus erodes individuals' control over the agenda of their own expressions of opinion. . . .

The most obvious consequence of this change is that polling can create a misleading picture of the agenda of public concerns, for what appears significant to the agencies sponsoring polls may be quite different from the concerns of the general public. Discrepancies between the polls' agenda and the general public's interests were especially acute during the political and social turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though, as we saw, polling was used by the government during this period to help curb disorder, the major commercial polls took little interest in the issues that aroused so much public concern. The year 1970, for example, was marked by racial strife and antiwar protest in the United States. At least fifty-four major antiwar protests and some forty major instances of racial violence occurred. Yet the 1970 national Gallup Poll devoted only 5 percent of its questions to American policy in Vietnam and only two of 162 questions to domestic race relations. Similarly, in 1971, despite the occurrence of some thirty-five major cases of racial unrest and twenty-six major episodes of student violence or protest, the national Gallup Poll that year devoted only two of its 194 questions to race relations and asked no questions at all about student protest. By contrast, that year's poll asked forty-two political "horse race" questions, concerning citizens' candidate preferences and electoral expectations as well as eleven questions relating to presidential popularity. An observer attempting to gauge the public's

interests from poll data might have concluded that Americans cared only about election forecasts and official popularity and were blithely unconcerned with the matters that were actually rending the social fabric of the era. . . .

Given the commercial character of the polling industry, differences between the polls' concerns and those of the general public are probably inevitable. Polls generally raise questions that are of interest to clients and purchasers of poll data—newspapers, political candidates, governmental agencies, business corporations, and so on. Questions of no immediate relevance to government, business, or politicians will not easily find their way into the surveys. This is particularly true of issues such as the validity of the capitalist economic system or the legitimacy of governmental authority, issues that business and government usually prefer not to see raised at all, much less at their own expense. Because they seldom pose questions about the foundations of the existing order, while constantly asking respondents to choose from among the alternatives defined by that order—candidates and consumer products, for example—polls may help to narrow the focus of public discussion and to reinforce the limits on what the public perceives to be realistic political and social possibilities.

But whatever the particular changes polling may help to produce in the focus of public discourse, the broader problem is that polling fundamentally alters the character of the public agenda of opinion. So long as groups and individuals typically present their opinions on topics of their own choosing, the agenda of opinion is likely to consist of citizens' own needs, hopes, and aspirations. Opinions elicited by polls, on the other hand, mainly concern matters of interest to government, business, or other poll sponsors. Typically, poll questions have as their ultimate purpose some form of exhortation. Businesses poll to help persuade customers to purchase their wares. Candidates poll as part of the process of convincing voters to support them. Governments poll as part of the process of inducing citizens to obey. . . .

In essence, rather than offer governments the opinions that citizens want them to learn, polls tell governments—or other sponsors—what they would like to learn about citizens' opinions. The end result is to change the public expression of opinion from an assertion of demand to a step in the process of persuasion.

Making Opinion Safer for Government

Taken together, the changes produced by polling contribute to the transformation of public opinion from an unpredictable, extreme, and often dangerous force into a more docile expression of public sentiment. Opinion stated through polls imposes less pressure and makes fewer demands

on government than would more spontaneous or natural assertions of popular sentiment. Though opinion may be expressed more democratically via polls than through alternative means, polling can give public opinion a plebiscitary character—robbing opinion of precisely those features that might maximize its impact on government and policy. . . .