

BASICSPLAINER – PUBLIC OPINION

Democracies are premised upon the belief that those in government should reflect the wishes of the rest of the population. Elections are one way of transmitting the public's views to government, but stances on policy issues and politics are more complex than may be conveyed in a simple yes/no vote on a ballot.

Those who study **public opinion** use the term to refer to this more detailed understanding of the public's views. The political scientist V.O. Key, writing in the 1960s, defined public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which government finds it prudent to heed."¹

This definition implies that officials may wish to pay attention to different groups of people at different times. They may find it important to pay attention to all adults in the United States, or just to those who are most likely to vote. A member of Congress will naturally focus on voters from her district more than on other voters. Subgroups of Americans (retired people, African Americans, gun owners, working class people, LGBTQ Americans, suburban people, etc.), by virtue of their social group environments and life experiences, may have distinctive views that elected officials also wish to know and pay attention to.

The difficulty is how to find out what the public (or key subgroups) thinks. The most common method used today is **public opinion polling**, asking questions of a small representative **sample** of people. Many professional polling operations conduct such polls (usually of between 500 and 1,500 people), and political campaigns and parties often hire such firms or conduct surveys of their own. Skeptics may doubt that the views of 1,000 people could accurately reflect the

views of a nation, but as Herbert Asher points out, this is no more counter-intuitive than suggesting that a small sample of one's blood can suffice to test for certain diseases, or that a spoonful of soup can give a chef a good sense of whether the dish needs more salt.²

Other methods of measuring public opinion include focus group testing, small group experiments, or the analysis of internet search terms, social media posts, and letters to the editor. Each can be useful, depending on what the researcher wants to find out. Each estimate of public opinion is associated with some degree of error, in part because by random chance the sample might differ from the **population** that the researcher wishes to find out about.

Another difficulty in measuring public opinion lies in gauging whether responses to researchers' queries represent genuine views that will affect people's votes or other political behavior. Evidence suggests that large numbers of Americans do not have a detailed understanding of politics, nor do they possess stable ideologies or well-informed positions on policy issues.³ Scholars disagree about how widespread and how consequential this lack of knowledge is, but at a minimum, survey responses should be treated cautiously.

People derive their opinions from their social group environment, the media, politicians and activists, and trusted friends or relatives. Most people collect information about politics second-hand, rather than by directly studying the issues. As a result, **opinion leaders**, those few Americans who pay close attention to politics, may have an outsized influence on public opinion.

¹ V.O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 14.

² Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public; What Every Citizen Should Know*, Ninth Edition (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2016), p. 26.

³ Donald R. Kinder & Nathan P. Kalmoe, *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).