

The Qualities of Public Opinion

At the beginning of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, public opinion about its conduct was not very clear, like a camera that is not focused. As the war progressed and U.S. involvement deepened, public opinion became increasingly clarified. In that case as in most cases, public opinion has identifiable qualities that change over time. Political scientists have identified some qualities to describe public opinion:

1. Intensity: How strongly people are willing to express their private opinions determines the intensity of public opinion. Consider, as an example, U.S. relations with Cuba. Normally, most Americans pay little attention to Fidel Castro and Cuba. In 2000, however, Americans and Cubans became consumed with the fate of an orphaned boy rescued from the sea – Elian Gonzales. Americans held intense opinions about whether he should be sent back to Cuba. Cuban Americans living in Miami, Florida, who usually have very intense opinions about American relations with Cuba, had especially intense opinions about the boy.

2. Fluidity: Public opinion can change drastically in a very short period of time. When this occurs, we say that public opinion is fluid. In 1945, at the end of W.W.II, for example, the Americans were about evenly divided in their opinions of the U.S. wartime ally, the Soviet Union. A 1945 Roper poll showed that about 39 percent of Americans saw the Soviets as peace loving whereas 38 percent felt they were aggressive. During the years of the Cold War, American opinion about the aims of the Soviet Union was very consistent. Between 13 and 17 percent of the American people believed that the Soviet Union was peace loving, and more than 60 percent saw it as aggressive. As Americans witnessed first the opening of the Soviet Union to Western influences in the late 1980s and then the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, Americans opinion about the Soviet Union changed quickly. Between 1985 and 1990, the number of Americans who saw the Soviet Union as peace loving increased from 17 percent to 43 percent. And by 1996, only 12 percent Americans saw Russia as an enemy of the U.S. The fluidity of American opinion was a response to the rapidly changing conditions in the Soviet Union and World Politics. Such fluidity in public opinion reflects public awareness of government policy and in turn influences government decision making.

3. Stability: Many individual opinions remain constant over a lifetime. Taken together, individual opinions that constitute public opinion may also be extremely stable, persisting for many years. Consider the effect of the actions of a series of Democratic administrations on the political attitudes of African Americans. The administration of Franklin Roosevelt (1933-45) was the first to take a real interest in the situation of African Americans. Harry Truman (1945-53) desegregated the armed forces. John Kennedy (1961-63) expressed his support for changes in civil rights laws that were finally passed under President Lyndon Johnson (1963-69). All of these actions led to the exceptional degree of loyalty that African Americans express for the

Democratic Party. Over the last four decades, about 90 percent of African Americans have usually supported the Democratic presidential candidate. Such stability in voting trends is remarkable.

4. *Relevance:* Relevant Public opinion for most people is simply public opinion that deals with issues concerning them. If a person has a sick parent who is having trouble meeting medical bills, then public opinion that is focused on the issues of Medicare or Medicaid will be relevant for that person. If another person likes to go hunting with his or her children, gun control becomes a relevant political issue. Of course, relevance changes according to events. Public concern about inflation, for example, was an all-time low from the late 1980s to the 1990s and early 2000s. Why? The reason was that the U.S. had relatively little inflation during that period. Public opinion about the issue of unemployment certainly was relevant during the Great Depression of 1930s but not in the 1960s, when the nation experienced 102 months of almost uninterrupted economic growth from 1961 to 1969, or in 2000, when unemployment reached a thirty-year low.

5. *Political Knowledge:* People are more likely to base their opinion on knowledge about an issue if they have strong feelings about the topic. Just as relevance and intensity are closely related to having an opinion, individuals who are strongly interested in a question will probably take the time to read about it.

Looking at the population as whole, the level of political information is modest. Survey research tells us that slightly less than 29 percent of adult Americans can give the name of their congresspersons, and just 25 percent can name both U.S. senators from their states. Only 34 percent of adults know that Congress declares war, though 70 percent know the majority party in Congress. What these data tell us is that Americans do not expend much effort remembering political facts that may not be important to their daily lives.

Americans are also likely to forget political information quite quickly. Facts those are of vital interest to citizens in a time of crisis lose their significance after the crisis has passed. In the 1985 New York Times/CBS News Survey on Vietnam, marking the 10th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War (1964-75), 63 percent of those questioned knew that the U.S. sided with the South Vietnamese in that conflict. Only 27 percent remembered, however, which side in that conflict launched the Tet offensive, which was a major political defeat for American and South Vietnamese forces?

If political information is perceived to be of no use to an individual or is painful to recall, it is not surprising that facts are forgotten. It is disconcerting to learn, however, that Americans have little or no information about policy decisions that have the potential to change our world. In June 1997, for example, 40 percent of Americans had not heard that Hong Kong was reverting to rule by China, and in the same year, as Congress was considering whether to admit new nations to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at a cost of billions of dollars to the U.S., 71 percent

of those questioned had heard very little or nothing at all about the expansion of NATO. Politicians can use this lack of interest to justify either voting as they see fit or opposing any initiative.

Project Questions

I. Work to be done: Summarize the 5 qualities to describe Public Opinion in 3-4 lines each.

1. Intensity:
2. Stability:
3. Relevance:
4. Political Knowledge:
5. Political Knowledge:

Please answer following questions of Research:

1. Discuss who James Madison was and what argument was made by him related to public opinion?
2. Discuss what Federalist Papers were, who were the authors of these papers and when these papers were published?

Please mark your preference here:

1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington D.C.?

Rate: 1 thru 10

2. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself in U.S. Supreme Court?

a. A great deal b. Quite a lot c. Some d. Very little

3. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself in Congress?

a. A great deal b. Quite a lot c. Some d. Very little

4. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself in Newspapers?

a. A great deal b. Quite a lot c. Some d. Very little

5. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself in Church or you religion's worship place?

a. A great deal b. Quite a lot c. Some d. Very little