

SOCIAL SURVEYS
AND
SOCIAL ACTION

by

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CHAPTER VII

THE BORROWERS

II. — *Public Opinion Surveys.*

To the present day sociologist it is something of a paradox that when in 1905 A. V. Dicey published his *Law and Opinion in England* he was content to review the main currents in political thought over the preceding hundred years without anywhere in his 500 pages showing any awareness of, or interest in, the opinions of the general underlying population. For Dicey, "public opinion" meant little more than the views of the sharply limited class of intellectuals whose writings directly influenced the minds of the nation's legislators. He was, of course, thinking within the tradition first explicitly enunciated by Burke at the end of the 18th century and restated 150 years later by Professor L. B. Namier. "It is difficult to see how policy can be democratically controlled, except through Parliament, and through the influence which the prevailing atmosphere exercises on Parliament and the Cabinet. For what is public opinion and how can it be ascertained? Or even could it be ascertained, its commands would mostly be vague and contradictory, and therefore impracticable. . . . What the public is called upon to do is to choose its rulers, and what it is entitled to know is the general trend of national policy."¹

1 L. B. NAMIER, *In the Margin of History*, London, 1939, p. 14.

In the United States views were different concerning the relations which ought to exist between the general masses and those temporarily selected to govern and administer. There it was taken for granted that legislators and officials were essentially delegates carrying out a mandate constantly liable to recall and legitimately sensitive to the pressures of their constituents. Under these circumstances it was not surprising that quite early in the history of the Republic enterprising newspapers set out to ascertain what the general public thought about various political issues and political figures. So-called "straw" votes were conducted by questioning people on the street about their opinions and their voting intentions. Such straw votes have been traced back in American journalism to 1824 when the Harrisburg *Pennsylvanian* set out to assess public opinion on the forthcoming Presidential election.

By the turn of the century these polls were a commonplace at every election. In order to ascertain the opinions of a wider public than could be reached by street interviewing some publications undertook a postal canvass of the electorate. This method was carried furthest by the weekly magazine, the *Literary Digest* which posted out questionnaires asking the recipients to declare not only their voting intentions, but also their views on such topical questions as prohibition and various New Deal policies.

In 1932, using this method, the *Literary Digest* predicted the popular vote for Roosevelt within one per cent. In 1936, as the elections drew near, the *Digest* poll again went into action. Over 10,000,000 questionnaires were posted to people whose names had been selected from automobile registration lists, telephone directories and similar sources. Some 2,376,000 completed questionnaires came back and when they were analysed they

indicated that President Roosevelt would receive 43% of the votes. In fact he obtained 61%, and the *Literary Digest* type of poll was permanently discredited as a technique in this particular field of opinion measurement.

The reasons for the failure were not far to seek. The *Digest* had picked a sample from a section of the population which was far from being representative of the total electorate—they had limited themselves to the wealthy and middle class groups, and even within this unrepresentative minority the responses had come from a non-typical over-prosperous section. At an election when class antagonisms ran high these were fatal biases.

Election forecasting as such, however, was not discredited. At the same election a new form of poll produced results which were remarkably close to the actual voting figures. This work stemmed from market research. In the late 1920's an increasing number of businesses had set out to study their markets by directly interviewing members of the public, in the streets and at their homes, and asking them which brands of various goods they bought, why they preferred these to others, which newspapers and magazines they read, where they shopped and so on. Most of these enquiries conformed to a simple pattern. Relatively small samples were used (2,000-4,000); the samples were constructed on a "quota" basis (i.e., the demographic, economic and geographical composition of the sample was a miniature reflection of the total population); and the information was collected by face-to-face interviews on the basis of a list of uniform questions.

One of the first men to consider that these techniques of measuring consumer buying habits might be applied to the measurement of electors' attitudes was Dr. Henry C. Link of the New York market research organization known as the Psychological Corporation. In October

1933, for example, his interviewers asked a sample of the population: "From what you have seen of the National Recovery Act in your neighborhood, do you believe it is working well?" The responses were:—

Yes	48%
No	27%
Uncertain	25%
	<hr/>
	100%

It was some time before this innovator had any followers. By 1935, however, several men in the fields of advertising, journalism, and marketing had set up organisations to carry out public opinion polls. Paul Cherington and Elmo Roper published their results in *Fortune* magazine; George Gallup syndicated the findings of his American Institute of Public Opinion in a variety of newspapers, and Archibald M. Crossley's results were published in the Hearst papers.

At the presidential elections of November, 1936, all three organisations issued predictions which came much closer to the actual outcome than did the *Literary Digest* Poll.

<i>Percentage of votes received by President Roosevelt.....</i>	<i>60.7%</i>
<i>Fortune prediction.....</i>	<i>61.7%</i>
<i>American Institute of Public Opinion prediction.....</i>	<i>53.8%</i>
<i>Archibald M. Crossley prediction.....</i>	<i>53.8%</i>

It looked as if a way had been found to measure public opinion reliably. Faith in the polling organisations and in their methods grew rapidly in the succeeding months. In 1937 the School of Public Affairs at Princeton University launched a new periodical, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, devoted entirely to the new discipline. It

concerned itself not only with polls of voting intentions (major elections are, after all, comparatively infrequent), but also with the whole field of attitude measurement through the interviewing of sample populations.

In 1940 the *Quarterly* began republishing the findings of the major polls. Here, taken from the 1942 and 1949 volumes are some typical questions on which public opinion had been measured:—

“Do you approve or disapprove of the way Roosevelt is handling his job as President today?”

“If you were elected to Congress, what laws would you want to have passed?”

“Do you think we will have gasoline rationing throughout the entire country within the next six months?”

“What punishment should be given to spies caught in this country?”

“Do you think some form of socialism would be a good thing or a bad thing for the country as a whole?”

“Do you think Americans are more democratic than Britishers?”

“Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way air raid precautions are being handled in this community?”

“Would you rather ride in a car driven by a man or a woman?”

“Do you think all Communists should or should not be removed now from jobs in U. S. industries that would be important in wartime?”

“Do you think epileptics should or should not be employed in jobs like other people?”

“Do you think that Spain under its present government should or should not become a member of the United Nations?”

After November, 1936, the measurement of public opinion by sample polls based on questionnaires expanded

with untrammelled exuberance. From the United States it spread to Europe and the English-speaking Dominions and by the time war broke out at least one of the pioneers was contemplating an international chain of polling organisations which would report simultaneously what the world thought on any issue.

In the post-war world these aspirations have been fulfilled and today we have at least two organisations operating internationally—George Gallup's chain of Gallup Institutes and Elmo Wilson's International Public Opinion Research Inc., which from its headquarters in New York operates with affiliated research companies throughout Europe and Latin-America.

Not unnaturally the polls from the very beginning excited increasing criticism. This was two-fold. One body of critics protested that the process was undemocratic, that it usurped the statesmanlike functions of politicians and tied their hands. It is a sufficient answer to this to point out that no responsible polling organisation has ever claimed that its findings should be treated as instructions to the nation's legislators. Rather, they have argued that the legislator who is aware of the state of public opinion on specific issues may be able to do a better job as a leader. The polls may reveal areas of confusion, of conflict, of errors and of ignorance, and true statesmanship will consist not in a cowardly association with or exploitation of these states of mind, but in a courageous acceptance of a challenge. If the challenge is not accepted then it is the politicians and not the polls which have undermined democracy.

The second criticism of the polls was more substantial. It was to the effect that its practitioners had, in fact, not yet developed techniques capable of measuring public opinion accurately. How far was this criticism sound?

It must be remembered that the polls had set themselves

two distinct tasks—to predict election results and to measure attitudes on general issues. Let us look at each of these separately.

From 1936 onwards and until 1948 the polling organisations had one unanswerable argument with which to silence those who said that their methods of forecasting election results were unsound. Their forecasts were almost invariably right or nearly right. Not until November, 1948, after the American Presidential elections, was it possible for the critics to take the offensive. On that occasion the three most highly publicised polling organisations were wrong in predicting which of the two major candidates would be in the lead.

	DEWEY.	TRUMAN.	OTHERS.
	%	%	%
<i>Actual votes.</i>	45.1	49.5	5.4 = 100
Predictions : Gallup .	49.5	44.5	6.0
Crossley.	49.9	44.8	5.3
Roper ..	52.2	37.1	10.7

The errors were comparatively small, but unforgivable to an outraged public which had come to regard the polls as infallible. They were apparently completely unaware of Dr. Gallup's frequent reminders that polling experience throughout the 1940's showed that the figures relating to each main candidate could be expected to be accurate only within a swing of plus or minus 3% of the poll prediction.¹

One fortunate outcome of the debacle was that the American Social Science Research Council immediately organised a committee of enquiry and its report crys-

¹ GEORGE GALLUP, *A Guide To Public Opinion Polls*, Princeton University Press, 1948.

talises all the criticism which could reasonably be levelled against election predictions as carried out up to that date. Simultaneously the polling organisations themselves, both commercial and academic, carried out post mortems and all the arguments were thoroughly aired in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* and in the *International Journal of Opinion and Attitude Research* (founded 1947). The general conclusions of this debate pointed to the essential weaknesses of all election prediction polls. They may be summarised as follows:—

a. Between the interview and polling day some informants who at the interview say that they intend to vote for candidate A (or party A) change their minds and either vote for candidate B or else abstain from voting entirely. At the same time, some informants who say they will vote for B also change their mind—some voting for A and some abstaining. It is extremely unlikely that all these shifts will neatly cancel out so that voting exactly matches the original interviewing results. Apparently what happened in the last days of the 1948 Presidential election campaign was that Mr. Dewey lost more supporters than he gained in this reshuffle.

b. Between the interview and polling day some informants who tell the interviewers that they do not know how they will vote make up their minds, and their decisions do not match those of the rest of the sample. Again, apparently what happened in 1948 was that of those who made up their minds very late in the campaign more voted for President Truman than for Mr. Dewey.

These difficulties seem inseparable from any

surveys attempting to forecast voting behaviour. Other defects were noted as possible contributing factors—such as the use of quota sampling and of untrained and unchecked interviewers; but these are common to other types of attitude surveys; they are remediable and by themselves constitute no inherent weakness in public opinion polls. The real danger is that even with probability sampling and with the most highly trained interviewers election prediction surveys can go wrong for no other reason than that people sometimes change their minds. This lesson has undoubtedly been learned and it is certain that although election prediction surveys will continue, yet their sponsors will cautiously and widely point out their limitations; and when they turn out to be right they will privately, if not publicly, wipe the sweat from their brows and thank their lucky stars.

The comparative success of the polls at the British General Election of 1950 undoubtedly restored much of the public faith in such surveys. Three of the national morning newspapers measured, with varying accuracy, the pre-election pulse of the electorate. The voting took place on February 23rd, and the latest figures published by each paper were:—

	<i>News Chronicle</i> (Inter- viewing Feb. 22).	<i>Daily Express</i> (Inter- viewing Feb. 17-21).	<i>Daily Mail</i> (Inter- viewing Feb. 15).	<i>Actual results.</i>
	%	%	%	%
Labour	45.0	44.0	42.5	46.2
Conservative...	43.5	44.5	45.5	43.4
Liberal, etc. ...	11.5	11.5	12.0	10.4
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The comparative success of the British polls was in part due to the lessons they had learned from American experience, and in part to the greater stability of British political attitudes; in Britain 84% of the electorate voted—as compared with a mere 50% in the United States—and apparently most people who voted in 1945 and went to the polls again in 1950 did not waver in their party allegiance.

In spite of this 1950 recovery in the prestige of election prediction polls it remains true that comparatively little progress has been made in tackling the fundamental problem in all surveys which aim to predict future action from present opinions. It is probable that, partly depending on the nature of the action, partly on the character of the people concerned, and partly on the urgency of the circumstances, then for every type of social action there must be a particular interval within which it is more likely than within any other that action will in fact coincide with opinion. So far, however, nobody has tried to find out what these favourable time intervals are. Until they do those responsible for prediction polls will be tempted to reduce progressively the time interval between opinion and action—until the time comes when the interval is negligible and the value of the polls is nil.

What about the validity of attitude polls outside the election prediction field? What value, if any, should be attached to the findings of surveys concerned with the measurement of public opinion on general issues? Quite early in the history of such studies academicians lodged four basic objections. They pointed out that:—

- a. Each person possesses many contradictory attitudes; the questionnaire may not give him opportunities to express this inconsistency and confusion.

- b.* In talking to a stranger the informant may not be truthful. "Rationalisation and deception inevitably occur, especially when the attitude studied pertains to the subject's moral life or social status. . . . Lack of insight, ignorance, suspicion, fear, a neurotic sense of guilt, undue enthusiasm, or even a knowledge of the investigator's purpose may invalidate an enquiry." By asking the informant to give his answers within a set scale (e.g. "Strongly favour, favour, indifferent, disapprove, strongly disapprove") we may be forcing him to give an inadequate or false account of his feelings.
- d.* It is very often extremely difficult to frame questions which give the informant an opportunity to deal reliably with the issue.

Professor Hadley Cantril of Princeton, in a book published in 1943, has dealt in detail with this last difficulty and he has listed eleven types of poor questions. They are:—

1. "Questions too vague to permit precise answers."
He cites as an example: "After the present war is over do you think people will have to work harder, about the same, or not so hard as before?" And he points to the vagueness of "people" (does this mean workers or everyone?), of "harder" (more intensively or longer hours?), and of "before" (before the war or before the peace?).
2. "Questions obscure in meaning." Here Professor Cantril cites: "If the German army overthrew Hitler and then offered to stop the war and discuss peace terms with the Allies, would you favour or oppose accepting the offer of the German army?" Almost half the informants

said they favoured this, but when subsequently they were questioned more closely it was found that most of them had identified the German army with the rank and file, the conscripts, and not with the High Command; when this alternative definition of "German army" was pointed out to them they declared themselves opposed to such a peace.

3. "Questions getting at some stereotype implicit in the questions rather than at the meanings intended." Thus, in examining answers to the question, "Do you feel that Negroes have just as good a chance as white people to get jobs?" it was found that people who disliked Negroes said "Yes" and people who liked Negroes said "No." "Questions misunderstood because they involve technical or unfamiliar words." One such question was: "Which organisation, the C.I.O. or the A.F. of L., do you think has the lower initiation fees?" On probing the informants Professor Cantril found that at least half the people who answered this question in fact had no knowledge either of what an initiation fee is or of precisely what the initiation fee was in each organisation. Similarly, a British survey in 1949 found that some Socialists said they agreed with the proposition "If the Conservatives win there will be an all round increase in the standard of living." They had understood by the last phrase that prices would go up. One experienced research worker has generalised to the effect that "90% of informants misunderstand 10% of the questions put to them, and 10% of informants misunderstand 90% of the questions put to them."

5. "Questions presenting issues not circumscribed."

Here Professor Cantril cites: "Are you in favour of Trade Unions?" A majority of people said they were, but when the issue was broken down to the actual impact of trade unionism on their daily lives some of those in favour changed their minds.

6. "Questions where the alternatives provided for answers are not exhaustive." The following questioning is typical: "If Russia should defeat Germany, which of these things do you think Russia would then try to do—try to spread Communism all through Europe, or work with Britain and the U. S. in making it possible for the countries of Europe to choose their own form of government?" Most informants obliged by selecting one or the other of these alternatives, but when it was put as an open question ("If Russia should defeat Germany, what do you think her European policy will be?"), then it was found that the informants spread themselves over 18 different policies.
7. "Questions where the possibilities provided for the informant's selection are too many or too long." Tests have shown that very few people are capable of keeping in mind the implications of more than three or four possibilities, and, in fact, if they are offered more than that they will disregard some of them in making their choice.
8. "Questions whose implications are not seen." One such example is: "When the war is over should the U. S. stay out of world affairs as much as possible or take an active part in world affairs?" Many of those who said they favoured active participation changed their minds when it was pointed out to them that this might mean maintaining a large army.

9. "Questions concerned with the affairs of only a portion of the population and therefore meaningless to many people." Thus, when informants were asked, "How much income tax should be paid by those earning over \$10,000 a year?" it was found that informants with very low incomes themselves suggested the lowest taxes for the rich—not out of pity but because from their valley a tax of \$25 a week seemed enormous.
10. "Questions giving only surface references." One such question is: "Is your job connected with the war effort?" When this question was put to a sample of women during the war almost all of them said "Yes," and in a sense they were right.
11. "Questions likely to elicit only stereotype answers." Thus, in one survey practically everyone answered "Yes" to the query "Do you believe in freedom of speech?" Later on, however, 60% of these informants said they did not believe in allowing Communists to hold public meetings.

And these are not all the criticisms that have been put forward. Some others are:

- e. Private opinions (i.e., those expressed to the interviewer) may not be a reliable guide to actual social action. The reasons for differences between the two are many and so far satisfactory methods have not been found of eliciting opinions which are genuinely under social control.
- f. Even where the questionnaire has been most carefully designed the results of a survey may be unreliable because of the influence and participation

of the interviewer. She may lack objectivity in recording what she has been told. And she may influence what she has been told by her manner, and her manner may be biased either by her own beliefs on the issue or by her expectations about the sort of person she is interviewing.

Nor does this exhaust the list of alleged defects in the methods of attitude surveys. But at least in the United States criticism has not led to defeatism. Many of the charges have been tested experimentally, new methods have been explored and at several universities there are vigorous departments and projects working continuously on the problems. Here we can mention only a few of them. In addition to the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton University under Professor Hadley Cantril there is, at Columbia University, the Bureau of Applied Social Research under Professor Paul Lazarsfeld; for many years the Bureau has taken a leading part in basic research. In particular it has examined the possibilities of "depth" interviewing (long, informal, probing discussions with the informant) and with "panels" (i.e., the repeated interviewing of the same person). At the University of Michigan, the Survey Research Center under Professor Rensis Lickert has also developed techniques of depth interviewing and has led the way in the use of small probability samples instead of quota samples. Finally, mention must be made of the National Opinion Research Center. This organisation like the other two just mentioned carries out major surveys alongside its research work in techniques. It was established in 1941 at the University of Denver, but in 1947 the Center under Dr. Clyde W. Hart was transferred to the University of Chicago with three main objectives :—

"To analyse and review the results of surveys made by other polling organisations.

"To discover, test and perfect new methods, techniques and devices for ascertaining the state of public opinion.

"To provide the University with a graduate department devoted to the newest of the social sciences, public opinion research."

Since its move to the University of Chicago the Center's largest experimental project has been a study of the measurement and control of interviewer effect in the course of attitude and opinion surveys.

Meanwhile, the commercial attitude survey organisations have taken note of the difficulties of question drafting and two devices have been increasingly popular. Largely under the lead of Elmo Roper the "cafeteria" question has been developed. Here each informant is asked to select from a series of statements which of them most closely reflects his attitude. For example, instead of asking people: "Are you satisfied with our policy towards Russia?" we might have a "cafeteria" approach as follows:

"With which one of these four statements do you come closest to agreeing?"

- a. It is going to be very important to keep on friendly terms with Russia, and we should make every possible effort to do so.
- b. It is important for the United States to be on friendly terms with Russia, but not so important that we should make too many concessions to her.
- c. If Russia wants to keep on friendly terms with us, we shouldn't discourage her, but there is no reason why we should make any special effort to be friendly.

- d. We would be better off if we have just as little as possible to do with Russia."

Additionally the informant is free to answer that he agrees with none of the four or that he has no opinion on the subject.

Again, George Gallup, mainly in response to the criticism that people may be offering opinions on subjects they know nothing about or on the basis of a misunderstanding of the question, has developed what he calls "The Quintamensional Plan of Question Design." More simply, this is a process whereby the questioning on any one issue is broken down into five stages. Thus, instead of asking the one question: "Do you approve or disapprove of giving \$250 million aid to Greece?" Gallup would ask five questions: He would:—

1. Find out what the person knows about the issue ("Have you heard or read about President Truman's speech to Congress asking for \$250 million to aid Greece?")
2. Ask what he thinks about the issue ("What is your own feeling as to what we should do about this?")
3. Then put the issue on a "yes-or-no" basis ("Would you like to see your Congressman vote for or against the bill asking for \$250 million to aid Greece?")
4. Ask why he feels as he does ("Why do you feel this way?")
5. Finally, find out how strongly he holds this opinion ("How strongly do you feel about this—very strongly, fairly strongly, or not at all strongly?")

The overall position today can be summarised as follows: surveys of public opinion and attitudes have lost the easy glamour they enjoyed in the first decade after the 1936 Presidential elections. The basic research on techniques which should have been done then has now been taken in hand and we can feel increasingly confident that society is adding to its resources a set of tools whereby public opinion can be reliably measured and appreciated.