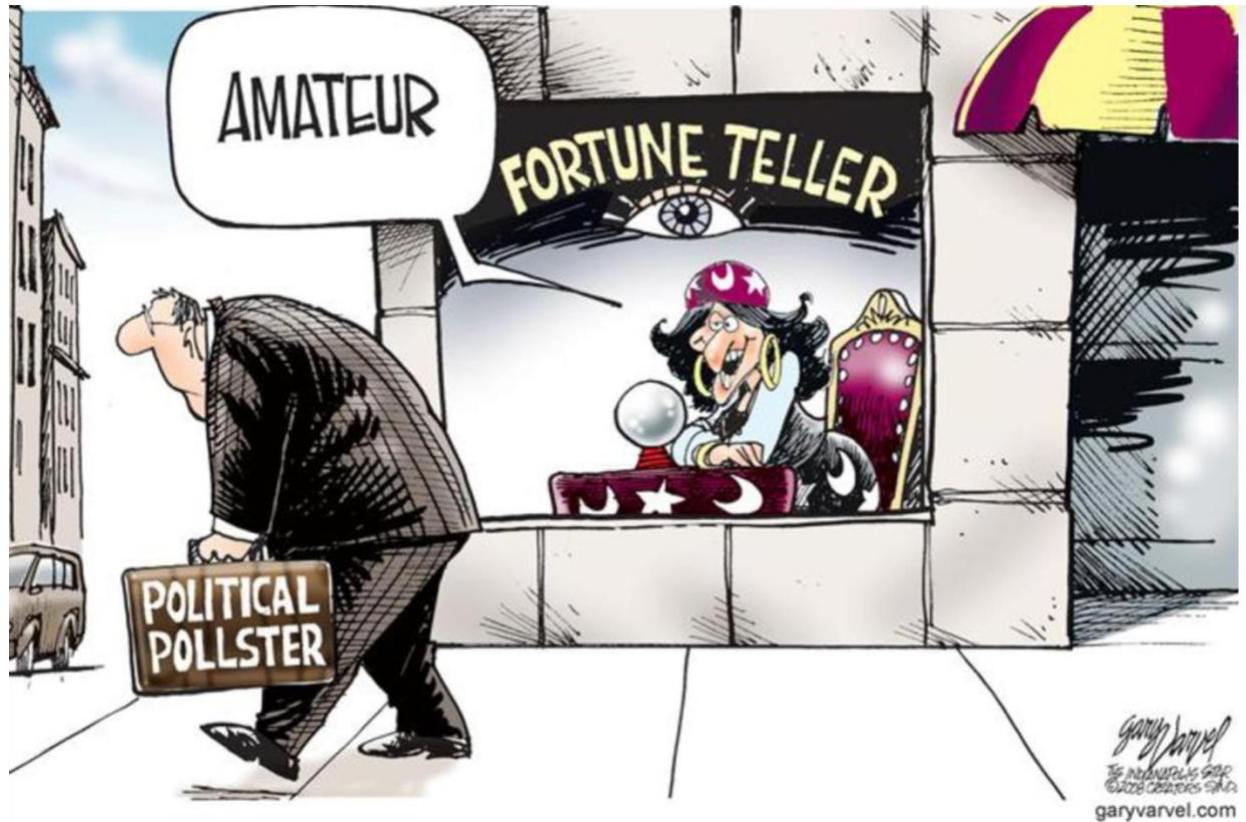


Supplemental Notes to Lecture 6 and Chapter 6: The Politics of Public Opinion



In our discussion of polling, we have before us four essential questions:

- What is Public Opinion?
- Is Public Opinion something that we *ought* to know?
- Is Public Opinion something that we *can* know?
- *What kind* of knowledge (if any) do public opinion surveys provide?

What is Public Opinion?

What is Public Opinion? As stated in Lecture 6, on page 186, our text gives us a seemingly simple response: “Public opinion is a collection of popular views about something.” Leaving

aside a consideration of voting (the main topic of next week), these popular views are “collected” by merging and tabulating the responses individuals give to pollsters who conduct surveys.

We should keep in mind that conducting scientific public opinion surveys requires a tremendous amount of time, money, and resources, which may lead some to ask: why go through all that trouble?

Is there some sort of public service that is performed by polling firms, many of whom are affiliated with universities and the legacy media? In other words, is public opinion something that we *ought* to know?

Is Public Opinion Something That We Ought to Know?

It is easy to find affirmative responses to this question, especially among educational and research institutions that either rely on survey data or conduct polls of their own.

For instance, the authors of a study undertaken by the [Brookings](#) Institute report that “polling is especially important in democracies whose politicians claim their mandates from the people and regularly insist that they represent the views and interests of the people.” By claiming that they represent the views of the people, the representatives of course must know what those views are, something that is not possible without having access to polling data.

Surveys are purportedly also empowering and democratic, in that they give everyone an equal chance of having their voices heard—especially those who, unlike, say, professional lobbyists or community activists, are otherwise unable or unwilling to express their opinion in a political setting or forum.

In the words of author and *Washington Post* columnist Charles Lane, “reliable public opinion polling is necessary to, and characteristic of, a healthy democracy. *Accurate information* about voter sentiment renders society intelligible to elected leaders, *and* leaders responsive to society.”

That is, in a “healthy democracy,” an “intelligible” electorate exerts influence upon responsive leaders who are predisposed to listen to the views of constituents, *an overwhelming majority of whom share core values* and are willing to settle relatively minor differences through the art of compromise.

Lane’s idealistic vision corresponds with what we described as the Anti-Federalist view of representation, or what our text describes on page 211 as the “delegate theory of representation” that “assumes the politician is in office to be the voice of the people.”

But according to Joshua Clinton, the director of the [Vanderbilt University Project on Unity and American Democracy](#), political polling can also be useful even if you reject the Antifederalist or delegate theory of representation

According to Clinton, “political leadership can, and should, help inform and shape public opinion—especially in a representative democracy where our elected officials often have more

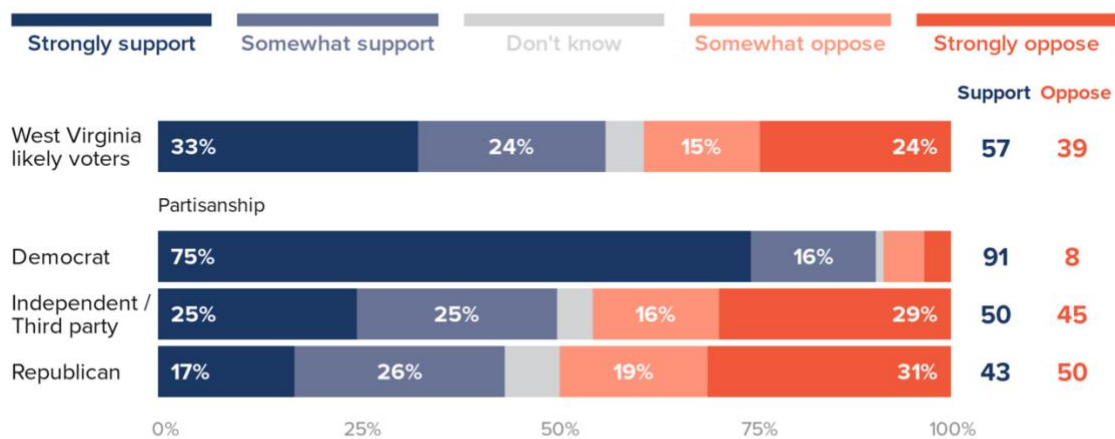
time, expertise, and awareness of the complex situations facing the nation than ordinary citizens.” By phrasing the matter that way, Clinton alludes to the Federalist theory of representation that we studied last month. Namely: that representatives will often know their constituents’ true interests better than the constituents themselves, which means that such elective leaders see it as their duty to refine the views of the people rather than merely reflect them.

For Clinton, the voice of the people is useful, then, not because it gives representatives their marching orders, telling them what must be done. Rather, public opinion provides elective leaders with a starting point, with “material” that can then be reshaped.

For example, survey data about voter attitudes might help a US senator come up with new justifications for supporting a bill before Congress that appears unpopular among residents of that state. Conversely, such data might help a senator come up with new justifications for *opposing* a bill before Congress that appears *popular* among residents of that state. The latter scenario currently faces Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, who opposes the so-called “Build Back Better” act, which a majority of West Virginians support, according to [a study conducted by Data For Progress.](#) It should as a result prove fascinating to monitor Manchin’s actions and statements about the Act over the next several weeks.

Voters in West Virginia Support the American Rescue Plan

Voters were provided a description of the American Rescue Plan and then asked if they support or oppose it.



April 30–May 4, 2021 survey of 440 likely voters

DATA FOR PROGRESS

We can then see why, according to Clinton, “knowing the public’s opinion matters because it reveals what the public *thinks it wants* from its government.” To refashion and elevate the views of the people, leaders first have to know what those unrefined interests *are*. They first have to know what the public mistakenly “*thinks it wants* from its government,” so that it can then take on the role of political educator and set about “correcting” those uninformed views about what truly lies in the “national interest.”

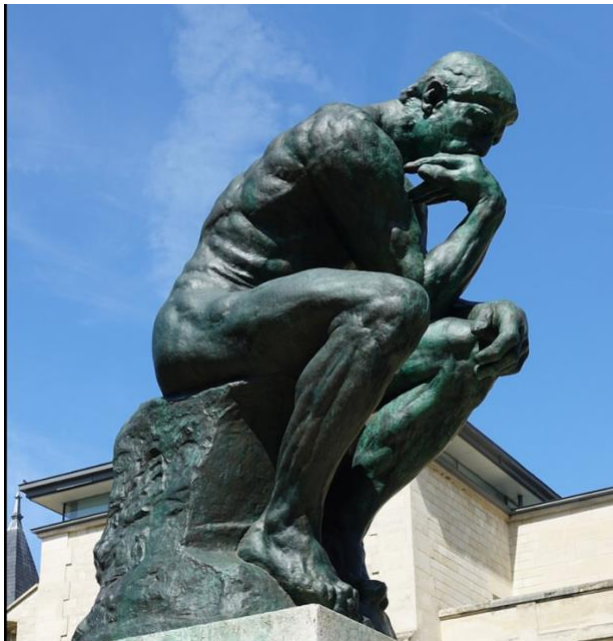
Viewed from the perspective of the Federalists and Antifederalists, or what we would today call the “elites” and populists, we can see there exists something of a consensus when it comes to answering the question of whether public opinion is something that we should know.

But *can* we know it? Do public opinion surveys actually reveal what the public thinks?

Is Public Opinion Something That We Can Know?

(Or: “What are they thinking about?”)

Going by the number of times the legacy media, interest groups, academic studies, and elective leaders cite polling data, the answer to this question seems obvious: of course, we can know public opinion, so long as the poll is conducted scientifically.



But that caveat does not address the severity of the problem, since flawed polling cannot simply be remedied by adopting a more rigorous polling methodology. No matter how sophisticated the latter is, the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of individuals whom pollsters attempt to reach refuse to respond—either by ignoring calls or throwing away unopened invitations to take part in surveys that are delivered in the mail (email invitations are similarly deleted unread).

According to pollster David Hill, the director of Hill Research Consultants, the “nonresponse” has had catastrophic effects on polling accuracy:

Whereas once I could extract one complete interview from five voters, it can now take calls to as many as 100 voters to complete a single interview, even more in some segments of the electorate. And here’s the killer detail: that single cooperative soul who speaks with an interviewer cannot possibly hold the same opinions as the 99 other voters who refused. In short, we no longer have truly random samples that support claims that poll results accurately represent opinions of the electorate. Instead, we have samples of “the willing,” what researchers call a “convenience sample” of those consenting to give us their time and opinions.

Such a grim assessment has been confirmed by various other pollsters, including methodologists at the Pew Research Center who have determined that a mere two percent of cell users respond to calls from pollsters, while 0.8 percent of landline users pick up the phone.

Theoretically, the pollsters could simply put in the extra time until they get enough responses. However, such heroic efforts would lead to a result that leaves a central fact unchanged: the few who do *respond* are not demographically or ideologically similar to those who ignore pollsters. That is, according to data analyst [David Shor](#), those who respond are among other things more politically engaged and trustful of political and social institutions, which distorts the results that are obtained from what is hardly a random sample of the US population.

What Kind of Knowledge do Public Opinion Surveys Provide?

Attempts are underway to correct for the fact that certain groups are more likely to respond to surveys (or to invitations to take part in surveys) than others, including offering financial incentives to potential respondents. (Naturally, it is out of the question to craft legislation that would *require* citizens to take part in polling surveys—though we should note that responding to the [US Census Bureau survey is required by federal law](#).) Should sample sizes become more accurate, there would remain a still greater need to avoid posing questions that—wittingly or unwittingly—are worded in ways that favor particular responses.

To take another illustrative example of how polls can distort rather than reflect public opinion, consider a February 2021 survey from Gallup, in which respondents were asked the following: “In your view, do the Republican and Democratic parties do an adequate job of representing the American people or do they do such a poor job that a third major party is needed?”

Sixty-two percent of respondents answered yes, but we should linger a moment over those results. Imagine if you had been asked that question. It’s often difficult while taking such a survey (if conducted over the phone) to pause, step back, and view the language of the questions critically. And that in and of itself can be a problem with polling.

But after the survey was over and you had a moment to reflect on it, how might you view that question? The way it is worded could plant the idea of the need for a third party in the mind of the person who is surveyed. A typical respondent might think to themselves while taking the survey: Now that you mention it, the Democrats and Republicans ARE doing a terrible job, and what we need are new ideas, like the creation of a third party. And that's something the respondent may not have even thought about prior to taking the survey. And it's something that the respondent may not think of again, shortly after the survey is over.

Notice also that in the Gallup question, there is no way for someone to say that the two-party system *is* doing an adequate job, *but* we still need more parties. Anyone holding that belief would simply not have a means of expressing their opinion. They would in effect be silenced, and their point of view would be excluded from the survey results.

Quiz Question 5: Do Joshua Clinton's views of the relationship between representatives and their constituents come closer to the Federalist position or the Anti-Federalist position? Briefly explain.

Quiz Question 6: What are the "samples of the willing" to which David Hill refers?

Quiz Question 7: Some have argued that offering monetary incentives for taking a public opinion survey would increase the rate of response. Well, do you think we could do the same for elections, in order to increase voter turnout? Briefly explain, why or why not.