

Some Thoughts on Recent Public Opinion Research

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My message this evening can be summarized in two sentences: First, we have not accomplished all we should have during the past 20 years because we have not been conducting the right kind of studies. Second, we can accomplish much more in the next 20 years if we start conducting the right kind of studies.

To judge what is “right,” to evaluate our own performance, I suggest we use the criteria derived from our professional self-concept as social scientists creating a body of scientific knowledge about the phenomenon of public opinion, and as seekers of truths which, when discovered, will enlighten mankind and make this a better world for all.

Let us examine these concepts. First, what do we mean by “science”? All definitions of science agree that its basic function is to produce an understanding of the order underlying some phenomenon, that this order is expressed in the form of a set of statements called theory, and that the theory is based on a process of observation and deduction that we call the scientific method. The question we must therefore ask ourselves is, have we been producing an understanding of the basic order underlying the phenomenon of public opinion during last 20 years? I think the answer is no.

As for “enlightenment,” we can perhaps understand it as the consequence of the conflict between an established set of beliefs through which a society perceives and explains the world and a new theory which will change the meaning of existence for that society, altering established relationships and changing individual self-concepts. Darwin’s theory of evolution and Freud’s theory of the subconscious are examples of such theories. It is this change in the world view that we usually mean when we speak of enlightenment. Have we been producing theories that have

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brought about a basic change in the world view of our society during the past 20 years? Once again, I think the answer is no.

Now let us consider the development of our own field of study. During the first 26 years or so of the scientific study of public opinion, say roughly from 1930 to 1956, we got off to a good start. We developed a methodology which, though crude compared to our current set of techniques, was good enough to conduct a number of excellent studies and to serve as the basis for developing the more powerful tools of today. The studies conducted in this early period did enable us to develop some basic understandings of the order underlying the phenomenon of public opinion and did challenge an existing world view. Consider, for example, two related findings of these early studies—that public opinion is very much affected by the social structure of a society, and that the influence of mass media on public opinion, far from being independent, is mediated by many other factors. These findings showed us the ways in which opinions were formed by the existing social structure and how they in turn changed that social structure. This view, in turn, challenged the existing view that public opinion was the simple addition of a number of isolated individual decisions, some the product of considered rational decision, and others the results of an ignorant lack of concern. These early findings, among others, were real progress toward understanding the order underlying the phenomenon of public opinion and contained within them the potential for enlightenment. Thus, we could say that, measured by our professional criteria, our field was successful during its early days.

Now let us consider the past 20 years, the period from 1956 to today. In a certain sense our field has thrived. We are conducting more and larger projects than ever before. But have we learned very much about the underlying order of the phenomenon of public opinion, and do our ideas contain the potential for enlightenment? I think the answer to both these questions is no. We have engaged in a great volume of studies which have contributed little or nothing to our basic understanding. Indeed, in certain important respects we do not seem to understand or accept the early findings in our field. For example, as a result of our early discovery about the role of social structure in the process of opinion formation we will routinely conduct a demographic analysis of an opinion we are studying, but we treat it in a simple descriptive way, and do not ask ourselves why one background characteristic affects one attitude and another affects a second. From the systematic pursuit of such a question we could advance our basic understanding beyond the simple early discovery that social structure affects public opinion. Or take, for another example, the finding that mass media do not have a very large independent effect on public opinion but act only in interaction with other factors. Our failure to take this finding seriously can be seen in the tendency of many of us to blame the mass media for all our social problems and to conduct

studies to prove it, while those of us who accept the earlier results are still conducting studies to show that they are true. This body of current research keeps us from developing the field by focusing our attention on the independent effect of mass media instead of giving our full efforts to the study of the interactions in which the effect of media really become meaningful; moreover, it turns our attention from the real source of our problems, which must be found in the real-life experiences of the members of our society as they are perceived by us from our positions in the social structure. That is, we will learn far more about the sources of crime, for example, by noting its strong relationship to age and social class and the changing rate with regard to sex than we will ever learn by studying the effect of the media on creating violence.

There are two essential ways to view a phenomenon we study: we can think of it as an unpredictable unfolding series of independent happenings, like a leaf blown around in a tempest, or as a determined single unfolding happening, like a boulder rapidly gaining momentum as it comes crashing down a mountain. For example, our early studies of voting behavior should lead us to the conclusion that the phenomenon is determined, yet we continue to study it as though it is of an indeterminate nature. Polling, by which we try to gain some insight into the progress of an election campaign by means of surveys, presumes that the campaign is a leaf in the wind and we are charting its latest unpredictable moves. But the results of elections can usually be predicted long in advance without surveys by studying the records of past elections. And when they cannot be so predicted, the regularities of the past point out what the real questions are that must be asked. For instance, a very small proportion of all congressmen is elected for the first time, which means that we can write the names of over 70 percent of the members of the new Congress today, even before the election, by simply listing the names of the present congressmen. By the same token, a presidential incumbent rarely loses an election. In the 37 presidential elections since popular vote was the major determinant of the election, 20 have involved incumbents. In 15 of these 20 elections, the incumbent has received the majority of the popular vote. In the five cases that were exceptions, two can be explained by depressions, two by the fact that the candidate initially came into office with less than a plurality of the popular vote, and one by a major split in his party. In a particular presidential election, we must first ask if an incumbent is running and if so, whether there is some extraordinary reason he might not be re-elected. If there is no such reason, we can predict the outcome of the election with great certainty. Our use of the polls under such circumstances is really counterproductive, because it denies the regularity that exists.

This brings us to the evaluation of our performance as a means for making this a better world for all. It has become increasingly clear over

the past 20 years that our earlier belief—that if we could get “them” to listen to what we knew the public really wanted, we could get “them” to implement programs that expressed the public’s needs—is a good deal more complicated than it first appeared. We have found, for example, that what most of the public may want is not always what is good for a large minority. We have found that when people in power know what the public wants, they have merely obtained another tool for carrying out their own purposes. On the basis of my own experience, I would say that most of the studies we conduct make very little difference one way or another to the lives of most members of the public. Some studies do carry positive benefits, but an equal number do as much harm as good. The net result is, I believe, that we cannot claim to have made this a much better world to live in.

What road do we take in the future if we are to do better? I believe that we must go back to the basic findings of our earlier studies and build on them a greater understanding of the order underlying public opinion. For through this road we may both advance our science and bring enlightenment into our world.