**Public Opinion**

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Public opinion is a very significant term related to politics, democracy and policymaking. It can be defined as the political desire of the general public. When listing out specifics in a democracy, public opinion becomes the political desire of a majority of the peoples that are being governed by representatives elected by them. However, laying down an exact definition of public opinion is a tricky thing to do. For starters, defining what the word ‘public’ constitutes can vary. Public can mean the entire population having a government in common, so they also have common issues regarding politics and policy. It can also be described as a group of people that are politically mobilized only by a certain issue and would ignore other aspects of politics and policy. Opinion is defined as the personal take of individuals that form the public. This take relates to political scenarios, legislature, political leaders and policymaking.

There are several factors that formulate public opinion around a political situation and others that regulate its ebb and flow. The main moderator of public opinion, by far, is media. It has been extensively argued that instead of public opinion designing the framework for policy, the reality is the other way around. It is policy and hence the opinion of the few with authority or access to authority who dictate what public opinion is going to come out of a political incident. The next tier of this argument is based on the idea that since authoritative figures have had the resources to control traditional media outlets, for example television and newspapers, it is these people whose opinion eventually seeps into the general public as well. However, as the attention shifts from traditional sources to current stakeholders like the internet and social media, the politicization of people and generation of public opinion has also faced a major upheaval. (Matthew Baum, 2019)

With traditional media, it generally took longer to educate the public over something as politically complex as foreign policy. It involved a theoretically neutral media that conveyed political views from both opposing sides. The environment hence created left the customers to ponder over the politics of the issue and take sides accordingly. Social media builds hype and frenzy by dishing out information at an unbearable rate. This creates extreme levels of polarization and discord in the public opinion. The controversial political idea of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ gets furthered in a bipartisan democracy like that in the USA. The public opinion today therefore depends heavily on the political correctness and polarization perpetrated on social media.

Since public opinion literally defines what the general public wants, I would strongly agree with the fact that it does indeed have a place of central importance in any democratic system. The entire concept of a democratically elected government rests on the single foremost idea that the government will represent the will of the people. Policy debates on such excruciatingly specific levels exist during an election campaign so voters can decide who better represents their political opinion. Plans for policymaking and legislation that a person lays out during campaigning are why people choose them as worthy of the legislative powers their votes will give. Without declaring that public opinion has a decisive say in policy, democracy cannot exist on principle. (Shapiro, 2011) Public opinion polls have existed for nearly a century to scientifically access and process public opinion on political situations that demand earnest public response in order to move forward.

However, there are still a few downsides to looking at public opinion especially in the form of polls as the true representative of the political atmosphere of a people. The demand of political correctness when out in the public has the tendency to mask actual political opinions of individuals. Moreover, the way a poll is worded is also a major factor in determining the answer. Public opinion is also fluid and unreliable. Its tendency to shift radically following seemingly small political incidents is why dependence on public opinion as a measure of morality or legitimization can be damaging. Anyhow, these arguments still fall short in comparison to the basic idea that when pursued literally, democracy simply means following public opinion.

A democratically elected prime minister resigned followed by a drastic change in global standings as a result of a public opinion poll in the UK. In terms of modern-day examples of how public opinion shapes democracies, no better example can be found. Although Brexit is the biggest public opinion disaster of recent times, the USA has also had a rich history of policy intertwined with public opinion. There is extensive data and research to back a strong correlation between public opinion and policy in the United States. (Benjamin Page, 1983) The presence of a striking congruence between policy and public opinion in the United States is a known fact. Examples are spread throughout American history. The congruence between policy and public opinion has been extraordinarily high when concerning issues like abortion, World War 2 and civil rights and liberties. This congruence then fluctuates when public opinion becomes fluid or unreliable. The issues that fall under this category include problems regarding the economy, political reform, foreign aid, US-Russia relations and national defense. A very recent example in the US political arena that involves a relationship between public opinion and policy can be found in the polls that followed the Muslim ban by Trump. (Loren Collingwood, 2018) The source of this congruence can be argued upon. This congruence is far from telling that it was in fact public opinion that drove a change in policy and not the other way around.

Hence, even though public opinion can be easily misguided and therefore shift drastically in short periods of to become an unreliable indicator of political patterns, it is still a crucial part of a working, healthy democracy. With public opinion polls still going strong, its place in the US democratic system is as unchallenged as a century ago.

# Works Cited

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