Public opinion polls

L.R. Jacobs, R. Y. Shapiro (2005). **Introduction to the Special Issue 2005: "Polling, Politics, The Media, and the 2004 Election".** *Public Opinion Quarterly, 69* (5), 635–641.

Do Americans think everybody should be allowed to carry a gun? How do they feel about the death penalty? And who will they vote for in the coming elections? Very frequently polls are organized to answer these kinds of questions. Polls and social surveys are often assumed to produce and uphold a receptive democracy. Others criticize the use of polls, as the general public would not be competent to identify the country's interest, and because polls and surveys are understood to be inherently biased, due to low response rates, biased question wordings, etc.

The 2005 special issue of Public Opinion Quarterly, the journal of AAPOR (American Association of Public Opinion Research) critically evaluates polling and the use of polls in American politics, with a focus on the 2004 election campaigns.

First, the accuracy of the 2004 election polls is addressed in various articles (Michael Traugott, Mark Blumenthal, Frank Newport, Robert Daves). The final preelection polls in 2004 were "overwhelmingly correct in identifying George Bush as the winner". Yet, various articles in this special issue show how the polls and their sponsors have now come under sneering attacks during election campaigns. Polling techniques and the polls' predictions have become more and more accurate, but their image has become worse and worse.

This does not seem to be caused by the polls themselves, but rather by the press coverage of polling results and polling methods. According to one article (Tom Rosenstiel), journalists are using polls to avoid the responsibility of reporting hard news in favor of inserting their own interpretations, which further erodes public trust in polling. Furthermore, journalists tend to hype statistically insignificant results, focus too much on imagined flaws in survey methods and are being influenced more by campaign strategists than by the factual data (Thomas Patterson).

Despite of the bad image of polling and the criticism on polls, election campaigns commission widespread polling for their own use. Polling could help candidates to converge on the midpoint of public opinion. However, polls are being used to select the proper voters: politicians would rather listen to the wealthy voters instead of to the poor and to business elites instead of to experts or the general public (Martin Gilen).

Jacobs and Shapiro conclude their introduction to this interesting special issue by suggesting a louder public voice to resist the constant charges against polling. Pollsters, survey researchers and the press must take a more aggressive and public role in explaining scientific polling and defending it against ungrounded criticisms.

(Bregje Holleman)

G. Myers (2005). **Applied Linguistics and Institutions of Opinion.** *Applied Linguistics, 26* (4), 527–544.

Public opinion research relies heavily on language use – whether one uses standardized surveys, focus groups, or public hearings, the basis of all of these procedures is talk, reading or writing. This article discusses some ways in which linguists, conversation analysts and social psychologists may help to understand and improve those procedures and give a new perspective on what opinions are.

This article's starting point is that institutions of opinion claim to speak for 'the people' and their results are very powerful, whereas the voice of 'the people' is not really heard in those results. So again an apparent crisis in public opinion research is being addressed (see the short review of POQ 69/5), but now the crisis is caused by the methodology of polls and surveys themselves.

Opinions are produced in a particular situation, rather than existing entities that can be elicited and aggregated at any given moment in time. As an example, Myer critically discusses the wording of some survey questions on attitudes towards nuclear energy, and also discusses the transcription of a focus group interview about the same issue. He claims that public opinion research is inherently circular: surveys ask about issues that are news, and their results then become news. Survey questions use 'commonplaces', textual instances of shared identities which are rather unstable in their meanings. He supports the idea of deliberative democracy, in which public opinion is not viewed as the sum of individual opinions, but as the result of a dialogue. It is unclear however, which sort of forum could provide a podium for public dialogue, neither has there been much academic study of actual public dialogues. And that is where applied linguists come in. Detailed studies of talk about opinions show the ambivalences in attitudes people hold towards an attitude object, and the relations between those attitudes and other aspects of people's thinking or people's lives.

(Bregje Holleman)

Framing

P.R. Brewer, K. Gross (2005). **Values, Framing and Citizens' Thoughts about Policy Issues: Effects on Content and Quality.** *Political Psychology, 26* (6), 929–948.

Political issues are often framed or defined in terms of values that are widely appreciated by the public, such as equality. This article examines the impact of framing on how people think about policy issues: to what extent can counter-framing limit the direction in which the opinion is being influenced? And how does framing influence the nature and number of people's thoughts about an issue? If framing influences how citizens think about an issue, this may have consequences for the depth and breadth of public deliberation about the issue – which in turn influences the quality of a deliberative democracy.

The issue that is framed in this research, is about school vouchers. One frame advocates vouchers as promoting equality, whereas the anti-school vouchers frame criticizes vouchers as undermining equality. Four conditions were compared: a pro-voucher equality frame, an anti-voucher equality frame, both frames and no frame.

In line with previous research, exposure to a frame does turn out to influence the direction of subjects' opinions. Also, it led them to express fewer overall thoughts about the issue. Counter-framing did not neutralize the effect of framing, neither on the content, nor on the quantity of thought. This suggests that framing can help to promote shared frames of reference for understanding and discussing issues, but it also means that framing