

Public discussion and the liberal shift

EARLY one October morning at the time of the war in Afghanistan, I was listening to the radio. The newscaster wondered why opinion polls revealed a public in favour of British intervention in Afghanistan while 'all those who phone this programme are against'. This woke me with a start, wondering what would happen next. More listeners phoned in. They spoke of self-selected groups and biased samples, but offered no explanation for the direction of the discrepancy.

A few days later, in a televised debate, two well-known commentators spoke in favour of British participation in the war, and two against. A lively debate ensued in front of a studio audience of 100 people, who subsequently voted. The audience was selected by National Opinion Polls to be a representative sample of the British electorate. At the end of the debate the vote for continued British participation in the war was carried by a narrow 51 per cent to 49 per cent (Channel 4: *War on Trial*, 27 October 2001). Though opinion measures were shifting during this period, the studio audience was remarkable for its close result, given that a poll carried out by MORI on 9 October found that 71 per cent thought Britain was right to have joined the military strikes, 20 per cent thought it was wrong and 8 per cent did not know (MORI, 2001). Was the method of sounding opinion affecting the outcome?

How opinions combine

Social psychologists have disagreed considerably on how opinions combine and become public. Gustave Le Bon (1896/1920) argued that the opinions of crowds were inferior and contagious and that these weaknesses applied even to juries. In contrast, McDougall (1920) argued in *The Group Mind* that 'public opinion was superior to individual and average opinion' (p.193). Both these approaches were discarded following Floyd Allport's (1937) sharp critique in his article 'Towards a science of public opinion'. Here he argued that public opinion was the arithmetic sum of individual opinions. In the same year George Gallup, a lecturer in psychology and journalism, introduced modern opinion polling techniques, using statistical samples. Their success at predicting voting behaviour has been



MARTIN ROISER examines different ways of estimating public opinion and asks how views change after group discussions.

generally impressive, but what lies behind the ballot box? We need to know how opinion aggregates depending on the method used.

There are various situations in which opinions may combine and be measured (see box), from small groups to a vote at a conference or assembly, to measuring population opinion through a ballot. Research has tended to focus on the smaller groups. For example, Puchta and Potter (2004) describe focus groups as 'producing opinions' and argue that the apparent vagueness of the focus group process is an advantage that would be lost if they were brought into line with some of the more technical social science concepts. But others argue that there is a direction to the opinions produced: Kogan and Wallach (1964) found that small groups giving hypothetical advice to people considering life dilemmas, such as an ambitious career move, tended to produce more risky judgements or opinions than the initial average. However, later research concluded that the more general effect was one of polarisation (Moscovici & Zavalloni,

1969). Thus Hogg and Vaughan (2002) suggest, hypothetically, that 'a collection of people who already slightly favour capital punishment is likely to produce a group decision that strongly favours capital punishment' (p.334).

Clearly, different methods have been developed for different purposes and their findings should be compared with care. What we need is a topic that has been researched by most or all of these methods: then we can start to look at how the results vary according to the approach used. Crime and punishment is such a topic.

Opinion polls Opinion polls on crime and punishment show a generally authoritarian public. The British Social Attitudes Report (Park *et al.*, 2000) found that 70 per cent of salaried people, 76 per cent of self-employed and 85 per cent of the working class believed that those who break the law deserved stiffer sentences. As criminologist Michael Hough (1996) had earlier observed, opinion polls have 'consistently painted a picture of a punitive public' (p.192).

OPINION MEASURES

Technique

- Opinion poll
- Referendum
- Focus group
- Mock jury
- Deliberative poll

Characteristics and uses

- Individual responses to set questions. Statistical sample of respondents. Low social involvement. Used to measure public opinion and predict voting or purchasing behaviour.
- Individual response to set question. Simple addition of votes. More social involvement than an opinion poll. Used, infrequently, for making decisions on important issues (e.g. the 1975 referendum on whether the UK should stay in or pull out of the Common Market).
- Open-ended responses in small group discussion. Low added information. High social involvement. Used in research, especially market research.
- Similar to focus group, but used specifically to research jury processes (see Hastie *et al.*, 1983).
- Opinion measures given to sample of about 300 people in a conference setting. Group discussion with added information. Research in participatory democracy.

Focus groups Hough's (1996) focus group study 'People talking about punishment' confirmed the finding of opinion polls that people believed sentencing to be too lenient. But Hough also found that participants underestimated the proportion of offenders that were actually sent to prison. Three quarters of the participants thought that 'less than 40 per cent of those convicted of causing death by dangerous driving go to prison' when, in fact, the figure was 71 per cent. This underestimation was repeated for a variety of crimes, and could have contributed to the punitive views expressed.

Juries The jury is a real-life version of the focus group. For obvious reasons jury deliberations are confidential, but their outcomes are public. On occasions, juries have shown a tendency to acquit defendants when the police and legal authorities were confident of their guilt. Baldwin and McConville (1982) reported jury acquittal rates in Birmingham of 31 per cent and London of 48 per cent. The former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Robert Mark, went so far as to say that juries were, 'occasionally stupid, prejudiced, barely literate and often incapable of applying the law as public opinion is led to suppose that they do' (cited in Hain, 1984, p.144).

Thus, opinion polls portray punitive attitudes, while juries can be more liberal than the police and judges would wish, and the pattern with focus groups is mixed. Given the extent of research in this area it would help further if there were a study that combined several methods. Fortunately this has been done.

Deliberative poll Fishkin's (1995) deliberative poll on crime and society was a versatile research project. It took the form of a conference in which a representative sample of 300 members of the public came together for three days, together with criminologists, politicians, victims of crime and convicts. There was intensive discussion of law and order issues in small groups and plenary sessions.

The poll also had an unusual aspect, namely that the researchers could meet an entire sample face-to-face. For them this was a new experience. Fishkin quoted Roger Jowell, director of Social and Community Planning Research, as saying, 'I've selected thousands of national random samples, but I've never seen one – no one

has' (in Fishkin, 1995, p.163). Making a sharper point, Fishkin added, with a touch of irony: '...by the conventions of survey research no one would ever wish to see a sample gathered together. After all people might talk to each other: they might discuss the issues and become more informed or change their views.' The deliberative poll on crime and society formed the basis of a television programme, and Tony Blair, then

4. *Suspects' rights* (e.g. 'Suspects should have the right to silence under questioning');
5. *Police resources* (e.g. 'On duty police should not normally carry guns');
6. *Crime prevention* (e.g. 'There should be more schemes like neighbourhood watch');
- and
7. *Moral climate* (e.g. 'Less violence and crime on television would be an effective way of reducing crime').

Following intensive discussions over three days the participants were again asked to indicate their views, and the researchers were able to assess whether item endorsements had changed and in which direction. The findings were reported in *The Independent* (9 May 1994) just after the conference and were later reiterated in Fishkin's book *The Voice of the People* (1995).

No hypothesis was advanced concerning shifts of opinion. Fishkin's conclusion was cautious saying, in one instance, that the participants 'have not been turned into liberals' (p.179). However, *The Independent* was more forthright, saying that the outcomes, in general, 'revealed a noticeable shift away from many Tory policies, with their emphasis on locking up offenders, heavy policing and reducing the right to silence'.

Fishkin's data give considerable detail about the shifting patterns of agreement following three days of discussion. For instance, the rather strict item 'Sending people to prison is an effective way of cutting crime' fell from 57 per cent to 38 per cent endorsement, while the more liberal 'Suspects should have the right to silence under questioning' went up from 36 per cent to 50 per cent. Some items did not shift. Thus 'The death penalty is the most appropriate sentence for some crimes' stayed unchanged at 68 per cent. But the general trend was liberal. Of the 31 statements, 20 showed a liberal shift (at the 5 per cent level in two-tailed tests). Only seven moved in an authoritarian direction, and four showed no significant shift.

The shifts do not seem to depend on the original leaning of the statement. Thus, there are both liberal and authoritarian statements that move in a liberal direction. However the effect is uneven across subtopics. Statements concerning prisons, juvenile crime, suspects' rights and police resources tended to move in a liberal direction, while views on crime prevention

On justice, opinion polls have consistently painted a picture of a punitive public

Shadow Home Secretary, took part in the discussion.

Both before and after the conference the participants were asked to indicate levels of agreement with 31 statements covering many law and order issues, phrased in both liberal and authoritarian directions. The items were grouped under seven subheadings:

1. *Prisons* (e.g. 'Sending people to prison is an efficient way of cutting crime');
2. *Sentencing* (e.g. 'All murderers should be given life');
3. *Juvenile crime* (e.g. 'First time young offenders should be given community service');

and moral climate became more authoritarian.

Although the authoritarian shifts in these last two areas deserve further research, the deliberative poll shows a general tendency for opinions to shift in a liberal direction. The effect may be connected with the social dynamics of the deliberative poll. The initial attitude measure is like an opinion poll, and then the process of discussion is like a focus group with specific added information, as in a jury. These may combine in some way to produce the liberal shifts obtained.

Fishkin seems to underplay these interesting findings. This is strange; the tendency is for researchers to make too much of their findings rather than too little! Perhaps, having no theoretical basis for explaining the shift, he chose to underplay its liberal direction. Perhaps journalists were reluctant to publicise such liberal shifts when the leading politician in attendance, Tony Blair, was advancing a policy of 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.

Social psychology and public opinion

The polarisation hypothesis would predict that items already judged as liberal would, after discussion, be judged liberal by a greater majority. But this did not happen in Fishkin's study, where most shifts were liberal. However, support for the authoritarian policy of capital punishment remained stable. This raises a question mark over Hogg and Vaughan's hypothetical example, where polarisation in an authoritarian direction is anticipated.



People may behave differently when involved in a more informed and less casual discussion

Closer to the present finding is O'Gorman's (1975) study demonstrating that individuals expected other people's attitudes on racial segregation to be more racist than they were. He called this phenomenon 'pluralistic ignorance'. If people set their cultural norms by reference to the more authoritarian sections of the media, they might overestimate the number of people who share those attitudes.

Such effects may be influenced by the social circumstances in which media are chosen, received and discussed. People may behave differently when they find themselves involved in a more informed and less casual discussion, as in a focus group or a jury. In a focus group, views are taken seriously and compiled into a report; jurors have the very serious task of deciding the guilt or innocence of a defendant. In such a situation they may set aside more casual and prejudged views taken from the media.

Further research and political relevance

The liberal shift shown in my re-analysis of Fishkin's work is an accidental finding and of uneven occurrence. This unevenness may be associated with the subcategories of opinion and these may need clearer definition. The extent of authoritarian or liberal sentiment portrayed in each statement could also be assessed.

These ideas derive largely from the social psychology of attitude. It is unfortunate that the topic of public opinion, although closely related to the social psychology of attitude, has been largely absent from the textbooks of social psychology for the last 60 years (Roiser, 2000). Its reintroduction would be of value both to social psychology and to the study of public opinion.

Finally, Fishkin's book is not just an academic study. The cover of his book expresses dissatisfaction, saying that 'ours is an era of stunted public discourse' in which political manipulation has 'overwhelmed participatory democracy'. This is a bold appeal for a more open democracy, an appeal that should have a resonance on both sides of the Atlantic.

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