

**Public opinion and the problem of information:  
Recovering a lost episode in the history of social psychology.**

**Susan Condor**

**For:**

**C. Howarth and E. Andreouli (eds) *Everyday Politics*. Routledge,  
forthcoming 2016.**

The term *public opinion* first gained popularity the 18th Century European enlightenment. Today, because of its centrality to the rationale of advanced liberal democracies, public opinion constitutes a nexus between the worlds of formal and everyday politics. This chapter outlines a tension between two competing assumptions about the relationship between public opinion and rational democratic governance. On the one hand, public opinion is treated as the ultimate source of political authority. On the other hand, the everyday opinion of mass publics is understood to be too heavily motivated by personal self-interest, and too deficient in factual understanding to ever serve as a legitimate basis for the governance of complex modern societies. In the second part of the chapter I present a case study from my own research on vernacular political reasoning, which draws upon early social psychological recommendations concerning the conceptualization and empirical study of public opinion. This perspective sheds light on the phenomenon of *empty attitudes*: sincere opinions on matters of public debate that can be satisfactorily justified without recourse to detailed factual information.

*Public Opinion as an ambiguous concept.*

In his 1965 text, *Public Opinion*, Harwood Childs famously listed 50 definitions of the term. Since that time it has become almost obligatory for authors to start out by reflecting on the polyvalence of the composite term and of each of its subcomponents. These different theoretical understandings underlie a dilemmatic orientation to the status of public opinion in relation to strategies of rational and reasonable governance. On the one hand, public opinion is understood as the mechanism by which thick political communities are formed and through which citizens realize their potential as active political subjects. On the other hand, public opinion is viewed as a mechanism for, and object of, political surveillance and regulation<sup>1</sup>.

For social scientists, precision is generally regarded as a *sine qua non* of academic life (Billig, 2013), and since the 1920s authors have suggested that

difficulties in reaching a consensual definition might preclude the adoption of public opinion as a technical concept (see Palmer, 1936). However, as the topic of intellectual or political debate, the ambiguity of the term *public opinion* may also have positive affordances. Sociologists of science have shown how vague constructs facilitate academic innovation and interdisciplinary cooperation. Psychologists, linguists and students of organizational culture emphasize the role of fuzzy logic in everyday cognition and communication. Studies of political communication have noted the advantages of strategic ambiguity for communicators wishing to future-proof their rhetoric, or to appeal simultaneously to diverse audiences.

As an example, we may consider how politicians invoke public opinion in the course of political debate. Perhaps the most straightforward cases involve what Drury (2014) calls *ad populum* arguments, in which speakers align themselves with existing public opinion. In terms of theories of democratic representation (e.g. Rehfeld, 2006) we might gloss these as situations in which politicians adopt – in appearance at least – a *delegate* footing. *Ad populum* arguments need not entail simple appeals to common category membership (cf. Haslam et al., 2011). Rather, they often involve a speaker simultaneously identifying with an immediate audience, whilst at the same time excluding that audience from the public with whose opinions they are aligning. In the following example, taken from a UK House of Commons debate over EU immigration in 2013, the speaker represents the political landscape in terms of two opposing camps: *public opinion* (elided with *British citizens, the British people, and constituents*), versus *this esteemed House of Commons* of whom those of *our colleagues* who are absent *this Chamber this morning* are treated as category prototypes:

British citizens are concerned that immigration from the European Union is

on far too large a scale. It is not about the colour of somebody's skin or the skills that they can bring, but about the numbers of people... That is the concern of the British people. I am afraid that this esteemed House of Commons is out of step with public opinion. The fact that fewer than 15 out of 650 hon. Members are in this Chamber this morning suggests to me that far too many of our colleagues are not listening closely enough to their constituents. The big issue in the country, about which people are talking every day of the week, is immigration.<sup>2</sup>

In other situations, politicians may employ what Drury terms *contra populum* arguments, establishing the rationality of their own political judgment through contrast with the ill-informed, unreliable or antisocial forces of public opinion. In the extract below, taken from a UK Justice Committee Report, the author is adopting a *trustee* model of democratic representation, in which elected Ministers have a duty to exercise their own expert judgment to protect the interests of their constituents and the State.

Wider factors, such as the media, public opinion and political rhetoric, contribute to risk averse court, probation and parole decisions and hence play a role in unnecessary system expansion. If Ministers wish the system to become sustainable within existing resources, they must recognize the distorting effect which these pressures have on the pursuit of a rational strategy.<sup>3</sup>

Formal political rhetoric does not simply embed contemporary publics and their current opinions, but also enlists the public in projections of the future. Politicians often appeal to *latent public opinion* (Key, 1961): future reactions on the part of a public. The following example comes from the Second Reading of the Scotland Bill in the UK House of Commons in 1998<sup>4</sup>

Far too many people seem to have forgotten what English nationalism is capable of. Even the briefest scanning of the history of the United Kingdom should be enough to remind us all: rape, pillage and mayhem leap from virtually every page of that history. Throughout Scotland, Wales and Ireland there are countless monuments to the local heroes who were slain in a vain

attempt to stem a relentless tide of English domination. It is worth looking back at what history has to teach us.

UK Parliamentary debates concerning the Scotland Bill typically displayed a nonsymmetrical stance towards public opinion. On the one hand, the population of Scotland, who had voted in favour of a separate Scottish Parliament in a referendum, was generally represented as a unitary citizenry with rights to political voice. In contrast, the population of England typically entered Parliamentary debate through *contra populum* arguments. This asymmetric representation was particularly evident among MPs representing constituencies in England, who often presented themselves as trustees of the British State, defending the minority national publics from the impending threat of popular English ochlocracy. Speakers regularly added literary embellishment to these representations through quotation from G.K. Chesterton's poem *The Secret People*, as illustrated by following example from a House of Commons debate in 1998:

The ugly ogre of English nationalism, which I detest, will begin to march soon unless it is forestalled. The Government have lit a camp fire of concern in England, which will soon burn into a forest fire unless we address it speedily. As G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1915,

"Smile at us, pay us, pass us: but do not quite forget. For we are the people of England, that have never spoken yet"--

and they will speak soon.<sup>5</sup>

### *Technologies of representation.*

In 1921, Lord Bryce answered his own rhetorical question, "How is the drift of public opinion to be ascertained?" as follows:

The best way in which the tendencies at work in any community can be discovered and estimated is by moving freely about among all sorts and

conditions of men...In every neighborhood [sic] there are unbiased persons with good opportunities for observing, and plenty of skill in 'sizing up' the attitude and proclivities of their fellow citizens... (p. 156)

This example reminds us that until the 1930s, if one wished to monitor public opinion, the only available options were a census, the kind of informal ethnography advocated by Bryce (and exemplified in the UK by Mass Observation), or straw polls such as those regularly conducted by US newspapers. Since this time, of course, the study of public opinion has become almost synonymous with the polling method popularized by George Gallop, which combines standardized, closed-ended questioning with representative sampling (Osborne & Rose, 1999).

As the title of their text, *The Pulse of Democracy*, suggests, Gallop and Rae (1940) promoted opinion polling as a practical technology for conveying citizens' views to their political representatives. The new technology was not, however, without its critics. As early as 1948, Blumer noted that, "those trying to study public opinion by polling are so wedded to their technique and so preoccupied with the improvement of their technique that they shunt aside the vital question of whether their technique is suited to the study of what they are ostensibly seeking to study. Their work is largely merely making application of their technique" (p.542). One consequence of what Blumer called the "operationist position", according to which "public opinion consists of what public opinion polls poll" (p. 543), was that research on public opinion rapidly became disconnected from academic theory in social psychology (Allport, 1937), political science (Price, 1992) and sociology (Manza & Brooks, 2012). This is not to say that polling methods were conceptually neutral. On the contrary, this technology constructed public opinion in a way that reinforced dominant understanding of democratic participation in the mid twentieth century USA

(Herbst, 1993). Polling methods resemble the private ballot, one-man-one-vote, method of democratic participation. Reports of opinion polls present an image of the public sphere as an undifferentiated mass society, comprised of essentially disconnected individuals thinking and (re)acting in parallel. In principle, pollsters could draw attention to the range of opinions existing within their target populations. In practice, public opinion tends to be equated with majority-preferred response options, in a manner analogous to majority rule decision-making. Channeled through the polls, the voice of the people is heard simply reacting to policy options rather than engaging in constructive public deliberation.

*The problem of information.*

Promoting opinion polling as the technology of choice for democratic governance during World War II, Gallop and Rae (1940) emphasized that that political “ignorance, stupidity and apathy are the exception, not the rule” (p. 287). A quarter of a century later, under different political circumstances, Philip Converse (1964) famously argued that the majority of the US electorate did not possess “meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantive periods of time” (p. 245). He argued that poll responses were rarely informed by politically sophisticated, internally consistent, abstract (*ideological*) reasoning. On the contrary, they often took the form of *non-attitudes*: answers produced by individuals who had no meaningful understanding of the topics on which their views were solicited. Converse’s account of the rational shortcomings of mass publics resonated with deficit models of public opinion that had been popular since Lippmann’s (1922) seminal treatise, and generated a heated debate that continues to the present day.

Converse was not the first to question the epistemological status of the “opinions” revealed through polling methods. In one early critique, Riesman and Glazer (1949) argued that a “real understanding” of public opinion “will only come...when polling moves away from an emphasis on set answers to set questions to an emphasis on the ‘latent’ meaning of answers, understood in terms of an entire interview and a grasp of what went on in the interpersonal situation of the interview” (p. 633). Similarly, social psychologists often challenged polling technologies, advocating “full discussion” as a preferable method for studying public opinions (e.g. Likert, 1947; Murphy & Likert, 1938; see J. Converse, 1987; Lazarsfeld, 1944), a position summarized by Asch (1952):

Perhaps we ought to take the bull by the horns and insist that an interview should approximate to a genuine conversation, in which one person explores a problem with another; perhaps the interviewer’s optimum role is not that of a camera or a ballot box. It may even be of value to observe how the person deals with facts and arguments that are new to him, to confront him with problems...Such procedures would approximate more closely to the requirements of psychological investigation and might prove fruitful for theory (pp. 559-560).

Prefiguring Converse’s critique, Asch noted “the problem of information”: the “danger of polling on matters about which there is little information and in which people are not interested is that the data will spuriously support the assumption that a public opinion exists” (p. 550). Unlike Converse, however, Asch regarded the problem of information as but one instance of a more general problem of interpreting poll data:

the information obtained from [closed ended opinion poll] questions is the distribution of the number of people who say “yes” or “no”; the rest is interpretation. For interpretation one must rely upon a knowledge of ...



ideas that the data has neither produced nor is capable of checking. The data make sense to us only because we have ... some idea of the “why” of the answers (pp. 546-7).

### **Opinionation without information: A case study of everyday political reasoning.**

For the past 15 years, my colleagues and I have been studying not only the “whats” and the “whys”, but also the “hows” of everyday political reasoning using the kinds of methods advocated by the early social psychologists. In particular, we have considered how an analytic focus on the ways in which people formulate political arguments in conversational contexts can enable us to appreciate the rationale behind those kinds of opinions (or non-opinions) that survey researchers are inclined to treat as *prima facie* evidence of citizen ignorance, irrationality and democratic incompetence (e.g. Condor & Gibson, 2007; Condor 2010; 2011; 2012; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013).

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on what Asch termed the “problem of information”. First, I will consider how an analysis of the rhetorical construction of opinion can enable us to appreciate the extent and kinds of factual information that people actually use when they discuss political issues. Second, I will demonstrate how conversational data can provide us with insights into the *rhetorical heuristics* that people employ in situations where they are unable to justify a particular political stance with detailed factual information or claims to epistemic authority (cf. Heritage, 2005).

#### *Background to the research.*

In the late 1990s, the UK government initiated a process of political decentralization that included the establishment of a new Scottish Parliament. As we

have already seen, the spectre of latent English public opinion featured heavily in subsequent parliamentary debates. The Earl of Onslow summed up the concerns of many when, during the second reading of the Scotland Bill in the UK House of Lords in June 1998, he asserted that, “The English simply will not put up with it”. The polls, however, generally failed to substantiate these pessimistic predictions. In 2001, Curtice and Seyd argued that the poll data indicated that, “A Scottish parliament appears not only to be the settled will<sup>6</sup> of Scots but also of the English” (p. 163). This gloss illustrates Bourdieu’s (1973) argument concerning the “consensus effect” of polling. Granted, none of the polls had indicated a groundswell of opposition to the new constitutional settlement. However, neither did they point to a consensus in favour. The depiction of English public opinion as settled was – in the absence of longitudinal evidence – clearly speculative, and overlooked the susceptibility of the survey findings to question wording and ordering effects (Bryant, 2008). The interpretation of the poll data as evidence of a definitive national will also involved, to echo Asch, ideas that the data had neither produced nor was capable of checking.

One possibility overlooked by the pollsters was that these survey responses might not reflect genuine attitudes at all. Did people in England actually possess the necessary information to answer questions about the new Scottish Parliament in any meaningful way? On the face of it, there were grounds for skepticism. There had been little press coverage of the devolution debates in in England (Rosie et al, 2006), and the poll data (characterized by a disproportionate use of “don’t know”, and non-extreme response options) was consistent with the possibility that the respondents were using satisficing strategies (cf. Krosnik et al 1996)<sup>7</sup>.

In the absence of information concerning everyday understandings of the devolution process in England, my colleagues and I explored this issue through an

interviewing strategy designed to elicit accounts that would, as far as possible, reflect the vocabulary and lines of argument that people might use in their everyday lives<sup>8</sup>. Respondents were recruited using maximum diversity sampling, and the eventual data corpus comprised 1928 recordings of informal “chats” with individuals and groups of friends or family members<sup>9</sup>. A sub-set of panel data involved repeat interviews with the same individuals, designed to monitor change over time<sup>10</sup>.

*Empty attitudes and rhetorical heuristics.*

Opinions towards the Scottish Parliament expressed in our studies paralleled trends identified by the polls, with about 70% of participants claiming neutral or positive attitudes. Basic content analysis was sufficient to discount the possibility that these were simply spurious responses (Goldsmith, 2001) to questions that the respondent had not understood. The interviews were conducted in such a way as to enable respondents to raise issues spontaneously. Under these circumstances, more than 90% of our participants demonstrated prior awareness of the new Scottish Parliament. However, this was not to say that they displayed much specific information concerning the devolution process. In fact, 60% of our respondents discussed the changes to the UK constitution at some length without mobilizing any factual information other than general background knowledge (e.g. *Scotland’s always had its own legal system*) or information which could be inferred from a mere awareness of the Scottish Parliament’s existence (e.g. *they make their own decisions*).

Respondents sometimes mentioned their lack of knowledge in the course of justifying neutral opinions (see extract 1, below). However, most respondents who argued in favour of the new Scottish Parliament did so without mobilizing any topic-specific information. As we shall see shortly, these *empty attitudes* (Condor, 2012)

could be warranted in a range of ways, and could prove to be surprisingly reliable over time and across conversational contexts.

Everyday political talk tends to be formulated with a view to norms of public reason: that is, assumptions about the kinds of positions, and forms of intervention, that are (and are not) typical, expected, or appropriate for members of particular communities. Interestingly, our respondents commonly treated a lack of information about the Scottish Parliament as typical of, and as uncontroversial within, their opinion community:

#### **EXTRACT 1<sup>11</sup>**

- I So, going back to what you said about the Scottish Parliament. Um. What were your thoughts on that at the time?
- Karen Err. I'm not sure. I'm not sure.
- I What about now? Do you think it was a good idea? Or [1.5]
- Karen I don't think I have an opinion one way or the other [1]
- I So it's not something that interests you?
- Karen Well, I wouldn't say that. I think you know it's interesting but I just don't know that much about it. You don't hear much about it down here do you? So it's difficult to have an opinion one way or the other.

Respondents could also treat ignorance as normative in a prescriptive sense, suggesting that the English public lacked category entitlement to factual information on the devolution debates or process. In the following extract, the respondent characterizes the English public as a latent mob in a manner that parallels the forms of representations employed by MPs in Parliamentary debates:

#### **EXTRACT 2**

- I Did you think that was the right decision?
- Mark Well yeah. Of course. They had a referendum and that's what they decided.
- I And it was the right decision?
- Mark Well, it's hardly for us to say, is it? It's up to them. And that's what they voted for. That's democracy.
- I Some people have been saying that it wasn't a very good decision.

Mark I wouldn't know about that. I have not heard much about it. You don't really hear anything in the newspapers, or on the Today programme of whatever you know.

I Do you think that maybe there should be more information in the media?

Mark Well:: not really. I don't really see it as being any of our business.

I Some people I think say that people in England should at least know what is going on in other parts of the United Kingdom (2) that they have a right-

Mark –yeah they probably do [laugh] well of course there will always be trouble makers. People out for a fight. People who are going to be like, “What about the English?” And that's I dunno but I wouldn't be surprised if that's what Scotland wanted a different umm parliament to get away from all of that so they could just make the decisions for themselves without all of that nonsense that they've always had to put up with across (.) history.

Respondents were also inclined to attribute the English public with limited rights to hold, or to publicly express, negative opinions towards the Scottish Parliament. Heritage (1984) has noted that contra-normative statements are liable to be *accounted for*, *delayed* within a turn and to be *prefaced* or *qualified*. These features were always present when English people voiced negative views of the new Scottish Parliament (see e.g. extract 6). In contrast, the expression of positive opinions was typically treated as normatively unaccountable, an orientation which could be discursively marked through argumentative elision, and the use of the generic *you* and rhetorical *just*.

Respondents could treat simple affirmation (*yes; of course*) or default arguments (*why not?*<sup>12</sup>) as sufficient justification for positive opinions:

### EXTRACT 3

I Mm. Okay. Do you think places like, countries like Scotland, and like Wales, and like Northern Ireland, are entitled to have their own parliaments?

Joyce Yes.

I Why? (2)

Joyce Now then, actually, I can't express it, positively ((laughter)) at all, but I can't see any reason why not.

Gigerenzer (2015) defines one-reason decisions as a “a class of heuristics that bases judgments on one good reason only...” (p. 124). The rhetorical parallel, often apparent in our respondents’ arguments in favor of the Scottish Parliament, was the use of a single bottom-line (cf. Potter et al., 1994) consideration. This could involve a bald allusion to the legitimacy of Scottish public opinion (*If that’s what they want*) possibly coupled with references to procedural justice (*that’s democracy; fair enough*). One common rhetorical heuristic involved generic assertions of Scottish *difference*, formulated as a matter of political *needs*:

#### EXTRACT 4

- Dan Yeah, it [the Scottish parliament] was a good idea.  
I It was a good idea. Why was it a good idea?  
Dan Because, it was. I think they're different from us and therefore they need different things. I think there should be collaboration between the two but I think giving them the parliament was a good idea.  
I How are they different from us?  
Dan Different lifestyles.  
I What's different about them?  
Dan I don't know. Perhaps their principles, the way they live, their lifestyles. Erm, I don't know, it's really hard to say, I think, but just an impression you get.

or distinctive *identity*:

#### EXTRACT 5

- Jerry [...] And especially now with Britain breaking up. We need to know which bit we are. It’s like it can’t just be “we’re all British” you know, because the Scots have their own identity, they’re “We’re not British, we’re Scottish” and the Welsh too they’ve always been really Welsh. And now with the new Parliaments I suppose it’s really only some people in Northern Ireland who are really like, “wahh we’re British”.  
I Is that something you were in favour of? The new parliaments?  
Jerry Oh yes. Why not? It just makes sense. [...]

In his account of non-attitudes, Converse (1964) depicted ideological thinking as involving explicit awareness of elite perspectives on the connection between

various political ideas ("what goes with what"). In contrast, studies of political rhetoric suggest that absence of an explicitly worked-through political argument need not necessarily indicate the absence of an underlying ideological rationale (Condor et al, 2014). On the contrary, the existence of commonplace or orthodox beliefs within a particular speech community may be discursively signaled by rhetorical elision. In the case of our data set, it was evident that minimal lines of argument in favour of the Scottish Parliament tended to rest on an implicit bedrock of shared assumptions about political legitimacy, including banal (Billig, 1995) assumptions concerning rights to national self determination.

What distinguished our more politically sophisticated respondents was not their *use* of ideological reasoning, but their tendency to explicitly *mention* the core political values that informed their opinions (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1981). In the stretch of talk reported in extract 6, Vicky is voicing a negative opinion of the Scottish Parliament. She reflexively orients to the fact that her views deviate from the dominant orthodoxy and, as such, require detailed explanation and justification. Vicky's warrant for her opinion involves an explicit appeal core political values, specifically a left-wing internationalist opposition to all forms of political nationalism:

#### EXTRACT 6

Vicky Well, (2) I'm not sure how to put it (.) It sounds terrible and I- I can sort of see it from their point of view. You know, I, I, I understand wh- why they want it or think they want it. (.) So erm I do understand how they feel and (.) at at one level I hope it all works out. But another part of me is thinking (.) and it's not (.) I'm not (.) you know it sounds a bit racist ((laugh)) but as I said my Dad's from Scotland so I'm half Scottish myself and (2) I dunno (.) eh (3) cos one of my most vivid childhood memories is visiting my cousins in Scotland and how they kept bullying me for being English and I remember being sort of surprised that the grown-ups never said anything about it, it was in fact like it was "ha ha" something funny you know. Obviously, that's different but at the same time I would have thought

that maybe people should perhaps be working trying to prevent that sort of mindset. And as a Socialist and someone who works a lot with international organizations I don't like nationalism full stop. And I'm inclined to think that whatever the problems the Scots think they have with the Union nationalism isn't the solution (3) This current obsession with national identity and divisions isn't healthy. You just have to look at what's happened in the Balkans. And I know it probably sounds terrible but I seriously think that to establish a new national parliament just at a time when with Europe there's some sort of chance that we could really be moving forward (.) looking towards the larger picture (.) well it all seems rather counterproductive.

In this exchange, Vicky displays her understanding of a range of political issues. However, viewed in the context of the interview discussion as a whole, it is clear that these references were effectively substituting for domain specific political information concerning the Scottish Parliament *per se*. At no stage in the extract, or the three hour interview from which it was drawn, did Vicky ever refer to any specific factual information pertaining to UK constitutional change.

*Opinion consistency: Empty attitudes as rhetorical constraint.*

In his seminal account of non-attitudes, Converse (1964) famously argued that uninformed opinions lack ideological *constraint*, and are therefore subject to random variation over time and across contexts. Consequently, it was interesting to note that in the panel study element of our research, individuals' empty attitudes concerning the Scottish Parliament were not inclined to vary in response to changes in the conversational context, and displayed a remarkable degree of consistency over time. This stability was not simply confined to attitude valence. Commonly, people justified their opinions on different occasions by drawing from the same stock of considerations, lines of argument, exemplary narratives, tropes and clichés.

For illustrative purposes, let us consider how one particular respondent – Jerry - discussed the Scottish Parliament on three separate occasions over a seven-year



period. In his first interview (extract 5) Jerry claimed a positive opinion towards the new Scottish parliament, a position which we warranted with a reference to the existence of a distinctive Scottish identity relayed through the use of active voicing (*'We're not British, we're Scottish'*). Twenty-two months later, Jerry participated in a group discussion in which the topic of the Scottish Parliament arose spontaneously:

**EXTRACT 7.**

Jerry What's the matter with Scotland?

Vicky Nothing's the matter with Scotland. I'm half Scottish myself. It's a beautiful place. I just wouldn't want to live there

I Because?

Vicky It's that, "we're Scottish, you're English" mentality.

Jerry I like that though. If they think of themselves as Scottish, why not?

Vicky Obviously I don't mind them thinking of themselves as Scottish. I think of myself as English. But it's one thing having a sense of identity, and another to be nationalistic.

Jerry So do you not think there should be a Scottish Parliament, then?

Vicky I dunno. On the one hand there's part of me that thinks obviously they voted for it and so I can't turn round and say to them, as an English person, "no you can't have it". But personally I just don't like nationalism. And I think recently we've seen what a dangerous thing nationalism can be and you'd think that it might have made everyone think before just jumping on the bandwagon.

Jerry But doesn't that make sense for every nation to rule themselves

Vicky Er (.) I suppose one reason I do feel so strongly about this is I used to visit my Dad's family in Scotland as a child, and I HATED it (.) cos my cousins were always on at me about being English. They'd mock my accent and say "English go home" and my Aunt and Uncle were like "Ha isn't that sweet". And I think that sort of nationalism can easily come come out in other ways. And in terms of politics I think that at the start of the twenty first century we should be thinking about how to make the world more inclusive how to have more cooperation between people not go back to that nineteenth century idea of every little separate nation for itself. So no, a Scottish Parliament, Welsh whatever I think it's a backward step.

(3)

I Do you agree?

Dan I dunno. I don't have strong views but I think it's probably a good thing. A good thing. Scottish people have always had a different way of life to us and so I can understand why they would want to have their own

parliament. They want different things and we want different things because it's a completely different culture.

Jerry I agree and, I mean they they themselves (.) the Scots have their own identity (.) And if it was like they said "yes we are UK" and everyone got on and was happy with it, then I'd be all for y'know. But it's not like that (.) as you say they've got their own culture and they say "we're Scottish". So if that means they want their own parliament and their own independence fair enough. It just makes sense for every country to just have it's own separate parliament.

In this extract we see Jerry again expressing a positive view towards the Scottish Parliament, and justifying this opinion with turns of phrase (*have their own identity, fair enough, it just makes sense*) and rhetorical tropes, including the use of active voicing to convey a sense of Scottish claims to national identity, which are markedly similar to those that he employed in his original interview.

Similarly, Dan is justifying his opinion through the same non-specific reference to life-style differences between England and Scotland that he had used in a one-to-one interview two years earlier (extract 4), and Vicky is again justifying a negative stance with reference to her principled opposition to political nationalism, and employing the same anecdote concerning her childhood experiences as we saw her use in extract 6.

Jerry's third interview was conducted seven years after his original research "chat". Extract 8 records the stretch of talk that followed after the interviewer had directly solicited Jerry's views on *devolution and the Scottish Parliament*.

#### EXTRACT 8

I I was just wondering, like we're interested in what people think about some of the current erm events that have been going on since we last spoke to them

Jerry Right. OK.

I One thing is like devolution, and the Scottish Parliament. Do you have maybe any views on that?

Jerry Yeah well I think it's right that they should have their own parliament because they they don't say they are British, they have their own identity. Britain isn't like Scotland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland all getting on, and if they

- want their own parliament, they are separate countries, then yeah it makes sense? Y'know it's fair enough.
- I Do you think that England should have its own parliament?
- Jerry Yes. If you have a Scottish Parliament, then why not?  
(2)
- I Do you think that's- things to do with the Scottish Parliament and whether there should be an English parliament, is that something you've maybe changed your mind about at all, over the past few years (.) or not really?
- Jerry I dunno. Um (.) Until you mentioned it just now (.) I don't know if I've thought of it to be honest with you. Um that it's- it's not, know what I mean? It's not something you really hear a lot about, is it? It's not something you know about. You know, it doesn't exactly crop up in conversation, does it? "Hello how's things and by the way you know that thing about devolution-?"  
(Laughter)
- I So how often would you say you discussed this sort of thing?
- Jerry I dunno (2) I'm not sure I ever have to be honest with you.

Years after his first interview, and in a very different kind of research context<sup>13</sup>, Jerry is still claiming positive attitudes towards the Scottish Parliament; he is still warranting this stance with reference to the fact that "*they...have their own identity*", and he is still treating national political self-determination as an incontrovertible political value.

This kind of consistency over time and across contexts was typical of empty-attitude formulations, and seemed to be a consequence of the fact that respondents' ability to conceptualize and articulate views was effectively constrained by their reliance on a limited set of political considerations and rhetorical heuristics<sup>14</sup>. This observation points to the possibility that there may exist more than one causal route to the accomplishment of attitude reliability. On the one hand, the articulation of coherent, stable and robust opinions may represent a function of political knowledge and active engagement, combined with the capacity to locate a particular issue within a more general system of political events, beliefs and values (the process that Converse called "ideological constraint"). On the other hand, in so far as instability in political attitude avowals may stem from variations in the situational salience of

particular political considerations (Zaller, 2002), it would follow that attitude inconsistency may also depend upon social actors possessing a reasonably extensive repertoire of relevant considerations to apply to a political event or process.

### **Concluding comments**

In this chapter I have noted a deep-rooted cultural ambivalence in discussions of public opinion. On the one hand, public opinion is treated as the ultimate source of political authority in direct or representative democracies. On the other hand, the irrational tendencies ascribed to public opinion can be regarded as the antithesis of the reasonable judgments required for political decision-making. Survey researchers often reify this conceptual ambivalence by distinguishing between two forms of political commonsense, exemplified by Converse's "black and white" model. On the one hand, politically sophisticated individuals' responses to opinion polls reflect genuine opinions. Their attitudes are highly crystalized, stable over time, and derived from an active engagement with factual information. These "genuine" opinions possess internal consistency and are integrated within a general, abstract, ideological frame of reference. On the other hand, the poll responses of less sophisticated individuals often take the form of non-attitudes: verbal responses which are not based on factual knowledge, or integrated into an abstract system of ideology, and which are subject to quasi-random variation depending on question wording and context.

By exploring the ways in which political opinions are expressed in everyday talk, it becomes easier to examine how people actually mobilize political information. In this chapter I have focused on a particular class of opinionation, which I termed *empty attitudes*. Superficially, empty attitudes look rather like non-attitudes: they involve a speaker adopting a stance for or against a political policy without reference

to any domain-specific information. However, once we start to examine the ways in which empty attitudes are expressed, we become aware of some notable points of similarity with survey researchers' notion of sophisticated, crystalized, opinions.

In the data corpus that I have been considering, there were some cases in which respondents' attitude claims involved ("spurious") verbal responses to questions that they did not appear to understand. More often, however, empty attitudes comprised sincere (if not especially salient, central or strongly held) evaluative stances<sup>15</sup>. When respondents were unable to mobilize domain-specific information to support their views, they were nevertheless able to draw upon a stock of ideological values and knowledge concerning political rights, responsibilities, social justice to enable them to formulate their opinion as a justifiable and acceptable intervention in a current public controversy. Individuals who were more actively engaged in political life could explicitly mention the political principles on which their views were based. However, less politically sophisticated respondents could still employ rhetorical heuristics that drew implicitly upon general ideological principles. Notwithstanding, or more precisely because of, their lack of issue content, empty attitudes could be highly internally coherent and consistent over time, and tended to be justified in highly abstract terms. And, in common with many abstract forms of social reasoning, empty attitude formulations tended to prioritise deontic issues rather than "rational" concerns over personal or group self-interest (Condor, 2012). Cognitive psychology perspectives on heuristic political reasoning often adopt a deficit model of public opinion. Starting from the assumption that "information is critical for citizens to perform their democratic duties", authors emphasize the "shortfalls of shortcuts" (Rogowski, 2013, p. 1). However, were we to extend Gigerenzer's (2015) perspective on the ecological rationality of heuristic judgments to

the field of political opinionation, we might start to appreciate some of the ways in which rhetorical heuristics may function to enable social actors to enact the role of reasonable democratic citizens in complex modern societies.

## References

- Allport, F. (1937) Toward a science of public opinion *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1, 7-23.
- Asch, S. (1952) *Social Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Barilli, R. (1989) *Rhetoric*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Billig, M. (1987) *Arguing and Thinking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Billig, M. (2013) *Learn to Write Badly*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) Public opinion does not exist. In, *Sociology in Question* (trans R. Nice). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Blumer, H. (1948) Public opinion and public opinion polling. *American Sociological Review*, 13, 542-549.
- Brice, J. Vicount (1921) *Modern Democracies*. (Volume 1) New York: Macmillan.
- Bryant, C. (2008) Devolution, equity and the English question. *Nations and Nationalism*, 14, 664-683.
- Childs, H. (1965) *Public Opinion*. USA: D. van Nostrand Company.
- Condor S. (2010). Devolution and National Identity: The Rules of English Dis/engagement. *Nations & Nationalism*. 16, 525-543.
- Condor, S. (2011). Sense and sensibility: The conversational etiquette of English national self-identification. In, A. Aughey & C. Berbech (Eds) *These Englands: A conversation on national identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Condor, S. (2012). Understanding English public reactions to the Scottish Parliament. *National Identities*, 14, 83-98.

- Condor, S. & Gibson, S. (2007). "Everybody's entitled to their own opinion": Ideological dilemmas of liberal individualism and active citizenship. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 6, 178-199.
- Converse, J. (1987) *Survey research in the United States: 1890-1960*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Converse, P.E. (1964) The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In, D.E, Apter (Ed) *Ideology and Discontent* London: Collier-Macmillan (pp. 206-261).
- Curtice, J. and Seyd, B. (2001) Is devolution strengthening or weakening the UK? In, A. Park, J. Curtice, K. Thomson, L. Jarvis, and C. Bromley, C. (eds.) *British Social Attitudes: the 18th Report*. London, Sage.
- Drury, J.P.M. (2014) *Speaking with the People's Voice*. Texas A & M University Press.
- Gallop, G. and Rae, S.F. (1940) *The Pulse of Democracy* New York: Glen & Schuster.
- Gigerenzer, G. (2015) *Simply Rational*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldsmith, R.E. (2001) Reducing spurious response in a field survey. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 129, 201-212.
- Haslam, S.A. Reicher, S.D. & Platow, M.J. (2011) *The New Psychology of Leadership*. Psychology Press.
- Herbst, S. (1993) *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Shaped American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heritage, J. (1984) *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Heritage, J. (1995) The terms of agreement. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 68, 15-38.



- Krosnick, J.A. Narayan, S.S. and Smith, W.R. (1996) Satisficing in surveys. In: M.T. Braverman and J. K. Slater (eds) *Advances in Survey Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (pp. 29-44).
- Key, V.O. (1961) *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. Alfred Knopf.
- Lazarsfeld, P.F. (1944) The controversy over detailed interviews – an offer for negotiation *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 8, 38-60.
- Lerner, M. (1980). *The Belief in a Just World*. Plenum: New York.
- Likert, R. (1947) The sample interview survey. In, W. Dennis et al. *Current Trends in Psychology* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Manza, J. and Brooks, C. (2012) How sociology lost public opinion. *Sociological Theory*, 30, 89-113.
- Murphy, G. & Likert, R. (1938) *Public opinion and the individual*. Oxford: Harper.
- Osborne, T. and Rose, N. (1999) Do the social sciences create phenomena? The example of public opinion research. *British Journal of Sociology*, 3, 367-396.
- Palmer, P.A. (1936) Public opinion in political theory. In C. Wittke (ed) *Essays in History and Political Theory*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (pp. 230-257).
- Potter, J., Edwards, D. and Ashmore, M. (1994) The bottom line. *Configurations*, 2, 1-14.
- Price, V. (1992) *Public Opinion*. Sage Research. Sage. (Pp 7-24).
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1981). Irony and the use-mention distinction. In P. Cole (Ed) *Radical Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press: 295-318.
- Rehfeld, A. (2006). Towards a General Theory of Political Representation *The Journal of Politics*, 68: 1–21.

- Riesman, D. & Glazer, N. (1949) The meaning of opinion. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12, 633-648.
- Rosie, M., Petersoo, P., MacInnes, J., Condor, S. & Kennedy, J. (2006). Mediating which nation? National identities in the British Press. *Semiotica*, 16, 327-344.
- Sapountzis, A. and Condor, S. (2013) Conspiracy accounting as intergroup theory. *Political Psychology*, 34, 731-745.
- Scheufele, D. (1999) Deliberation or dispute? . *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 11, 25-58.
- Zajonc, R. (1980) Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences. *American Psychologist*, 35, 151-175.
- Zaller, J.R. (1992) *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* New York: Cambridge University Albany Law Review.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Although I am focussing on modern debates about public opinion, similar concerns can be identified in classical debates concerning *episteme* versus *doxa* (Barilli, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Mr Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) *Hansard* 11 Dec 2013: Column 80WH.

<sup>3</sup> Justice Committee - First Report *Cutting crime: the case for justice reinvestment*. House of Commons, 1 December 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Mr Wilshire, (Spelthorne) (Con), *Hansard* 12 Jan 1998 : Columns 89-90.

<sup>5</sup> Mr. Luff (Con). *Hansard* 16 Jan 1998 : Column 63

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “settled will of the Scottish people” is a conventionalized formulation, first introduced by the Labour Party leader, John Smith.

<sup>7</sup> The 2003 British Social Attitudes survey included a 4-item test of knowledge. Secondary analysis by the present author indicated a lower than chance level of correct response to the four knowledge questions: in England, 72% of respondents answered one or no questions correctly.

<sup>8</sup> This research was conducted with Jackie Abell, Clifford Stevenson and Stephen Gibson. For details of the methodology, see Condor (2010; 2012).

<sup>9</sup> This method was chosen to reflect the kinds of situations in which everyday discussion of political issues might normally occur (Scheufele, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Collected for the project: Migrants and Nationals, conducted with Frank Bechhofer, David McCrone and Richard Kiely at Edinburgh University, funded within the Leverhulme Trust *Constitutional Change and Identity* programme.

<sup>11</sup> Transcription symbols:

<u>underline</u>	Stress on syllable or word
dash-	Abrupt cut off
question mark?	Rising inflection
(2)	Pause measured to the nearest second
(.)	Pause of less than one second
[...]	Omitted material

<sup>12</sup> *Why not* arguments also point to the operation of just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> This was a telephone interview, taking the form of a direct question-and-answer exchange, directed by a different interviewer.

<sup>14</sup> This may, of course, have been the result of the respondents’ attempts to appear consistent. However, the interviews were deigned to be non-reactive with respect to the core topics of our research. Respondents often failed to display any memory of

---

earlier conversations (see e.g. extract 8), and it was notable that their views on issues on which they possessed more factual knowledge tended to be far less consistent.

<sup>15</sup> Although public opinion researchers typically assume that people develop genuine attitudes only through active engagement with relevant information, social psychologists argue that people may not require detailed information to develop sincere attitudes (e.g. Zajonc, 1980). As Thurstone noted, “the important point for the purpose of attitude measurement is that [...] vagueness in supplying cognitive detail does not in the least invalidate [an individual’s] expression of attitude” (1931, p. 267).