

4.6 Evaluating Public Opinion Data

Explain the quality and credibility of claims based on public opinion data

In a representative government like ours it is absolutely necessary to know what the people want. First label and group together like-minded citizens. Then collect opinions on the issues. Taken together these short cuts enable our elected officials to properly represent the citizenry. When done properly our political efficacy is strong. More importantly it demonstrates that our democracy works.

The most fundamental question to any democracy has been and will always be, "What did you know and when did you know it?" At the heart of democracy is an informed citizenry. The prospect of self-government, the definition of democracy itself, does not rest on fixed institutions but ultimately on human choices. One hopes our choices are based upon facts and not fictions. A strong democracy obliges a robust truth business. A bull market in knowledge acquisition is not only for the top 1%.

There is no shortage of bull in today's democratic marketplace. Our public square appears to be dominated by all sorts of viral videos. Characters have trumped character. Demagoguery is now seen as prerequisite for public office. The modern information age ironically finds its citizens misinformed. A close examination of our democracy reveals that we have an epistemology problem. The lack of what we know and when we know it would seem to endanger our polity. Recent polls suggest that the American citizen trusts less and holds little confidence in our government. Invariably this impacts our elections and policy debates.

A notable political scientist has written,

"[Democratic] government...cannot be worked successfully...unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions." Or in other words, a free and independent press is essential. If an elite media is no longer an option then perhaps the responsibility is ours. Each and every citizen must collaborate together, as best as they can, to create pictures and images that simplify the great issues facing our society."

For many these pictures arrive at our doorstep in the form of valid public opinion polls. We count on an objective media to inform us. But in its absence, we count on each other to build coalitions of opinion makers to influence our political decision makers. Public opinion polls today influence our political process more than ever before. The single greatest check on our elite institutions like Congress, the Presidency and the Courts is not structural in nature. Rather public opinion today serves as the greatest check on government actions at each level.

Media plays an important role in the dissemination of poll results. Often the media reports on our political process like a horse race. As a scorekeeper, media spends more time telling the citizenry who is ahead rather than what issues matter most. Popularity has become more important than party platforms. In this way the relationship between polling and elections has grown symbiotic. Polls both push and pull. Their reliability and veracity go a long way in explaining electoral outcomes.

Whether or not we realize it or appreciate it, this kind of sounds like what the word democracy expected in the first place. In many ways public opinion polls are like holding an election each and every day that they are taken. Let your opinions be known and watch your government react.