

Public Opinion and Power Politics.

More than a century ago the French historian and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59) wrote that the greatest danger he found in the United States is enslavement to public opinion. He called it the "tyranny of the majority." In England, philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) insisted that public opinion was a significant force for the social control of misrule and an important basis for democracy. The importance of public opinion is not in doubt. But there is no accepted definition. It is generally defined as a collection of individual opinions on an issue of public interest. In a democracy, public opinion is made public through elections, referendums, lobbying and pressure group activities, and polls. Although it is a vague concept, politicians and governments recognize its significance in the political process and seek to shape it in support of their major policies. Of course, in totalitarian states there is no such a thing as public opinion. All means of expression are used for propaganda on behalf of existing rulers. As Herman Dooyeweerd points out: "Never perhaps has 'public opinion' been considered so important as in the modern dictatorships with their autocratic leader-principle and their ceaseless propaganda to regulate and control public opinion."

Measuring Public Opinion.

Public opinion is measured by questionnaires or phone polling. But how reliable is polling? In *Beyond Fate* Margaret Visser points out that pollsters treat our preferences and opinions as objects. When enough of them are collected, they are turned into predictions about how huge numbers of people will behave, vote, or what soap they prefer. She comments that "should I personally disagree with the conclusion, what I think means nothing whatsoever." Efforts to measure public opinion began in the early 19th century. Some American newspapers, in an attempt to calculate the outcome of an upcoming election, asked their readers to send in their straw votes, which the paper then compiled and published. The election of 1936 was a disaster for this kind of a poll. Despite a massive sample of 2.4 million mailed-in ballots, the *Literary Digest*, which conducted the poll, underestimated the election of Franklin Roosevelt by 19.3 %. Whereas the polls indicated that Alfred Landon would win by a wide margin, in the actual election President Roosevelt overwhelmingly won reelection. As a result of this polling fiasco, the *Literary Digest* disappeared from the American scene. In the 1948 presidential election polling groups failed to predict the Truman victory, resulting in considerable public skepticism of polling techniques and suspicion of pollsters' objectives. New techniques developed since 1948, including the use of computers, have increased predictive accuracy. Major prediction problems still occur, however, especially if large numbers of voters remain "undecided" up to election day. The 1980 presidential election provided an example of this, with a surprising last-minute swing of millions of undecided voters to Ronald Reagan.

Public Opinion and Morals .

Public opinion has a powerful influence on the moral standards of a nation. Today the question is where can we still find a firm foundation on which to base our norms and values? A French Jew by the name of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) replaced divine moral authority with the moral authority of human reason. He founded his social theory on the assumption that men have a vital psychological need of morality. Eventually he came to the conclusion that one should determine what is normative on what is good and evil on what the majority of the people think. Now we can understand why so many inquiries are set up to poll opinions - so many for abortion, so many against, so many for pre-marital sex, so many against. That which the majority eventually decides on and accepts is then considered to be the norm for behaviour. When Christians say we cannot agree with a norm based on a public poll because God's Word requires this, we are considered immoral and without norms! For example, those who oppose the gay agenda are called homophobic or worse.

Politics and Public Opinion.

It has been suggested that polls can cause voters to change their minds in order to be on the winning side, that weaker parties benefit as a result of an underdog effect, and that polls discourage voting by many who feel the result is a foregone conclusion. Governments in power regularly conduct opinion polls prior to introducing new legislation in order to gauge the public's response. Researchers claim that some political leaders have always sought to follow or manipulate public opinion and always will, and also point to the many cases where minority viewpoints have ultimately become the prevailing opinion of the public. Dooyeweerd comments that public opinion is formed under the guidance of prominent politicians who know the art of rousing the national conscience. President Richard Nixon was notorious for his attempts to manipulate public opinion. Charles Colson recounts his experience as chairman of a committee of White House staff who worked full time studying daily news briefings, monitoring public reactions to presidential speeches, taking daily polls, and feeding positive information to friendly voters. Colson said that "often we aggressively tried to manipulate public opinion."

Canadian political parties use polls with increasing frequency, as do Canadian government agencies, royal commissions, task forces and other policy-oriented groups. The Liberal, Conservative, and New Democratic parties all regularly commission surveys for their private use. The surveys are conducted not only by conventional polling specialists but by sociologists and social psychologists as well. Polling during an election campaign is now a prominent feature on the political scene. For obvious reasons, however, some politicians view published pre-election surveys with scorn, as reflected in the late Canadian statesman and prime minister Mr. John Diefenbaker's famous comment, "Every morning when I take my little dog, Happy, for a walk, I watch with great interest what he does to the poles."

Power of the Media

The mass media have become extremely important to government and politics. Objectives include the winning of elections, the marshalling of support for or opposition to programs, and the education of the public on major issues. The media are neither objective nor neutral. They relativize. They try to put on the noses of their readers, listeners, or viewers, secular-postmodern glasses through which to see the world. Television, in particular, has become an important means for politicians to build an "image campaign." Special techniques (contrived situations, spot announcements, editing of videotapes, and the like) are used to achieve short-term shifts in voter behaviour.

The media have not been Christian-friendly. For example, Edward L. Bernays (1895-1995), who pioneered public relations based on social science and market research, was an atheist. He wrote the first book on public relations, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923). He was still counselling industrial and government clients after his 100th birthday. He argued from 1920s onward that "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society." Without the presence of God, Bernays believed that wise men such as himself had to "pull the wires, which control the public mind." David Aikman, retired senior correspondent for Time, told a reporter from Insight on the News: "In the highly secular culture of American newsrooms, which are far more secular than society at large, what Christians often face is outright bigotry." Indeed, Christians are regularly targeted for ridicule and vilification by a significant portion of America's elite, a situation all the more striking in the view of prevailing hypersensitivity toward other religions such as Islam and gay and transgender groups. Why the double standard?

Critique of Public Opinion

The discussion of public opinion as a subject for serious inquiry began soon after the appearance of ideological movements affiliated with the French Revolution. In the utopianism of liberal and social revolutionary movements, it was assumed that the people were perfectible and ultimately rational. But the principle of sin leads human beings to a world without law, without truth. As the English poet and philosopher Coleridge (1772-1834) pointed out, after a summary of the factors that led to the French revolution, that the voice of the people is not the voice of God.

Public opinion has not always led to democracy and freedom. People have not always been loyal to parliaments and their associated political processes such as political parties and elections. We may note the rise of fascism, Naziism, and the incredible wars of the 20th century. In *Prodigal Press* Marvin Olasky points out that Biblically, there is little praise for the rationality of either individuals and groups of individuals, or for our ability to come to good judgments by following our natural tendencies. Rather, all of us are sinners, easily fooled by others or by ourselves, and ready to become a mob. For example, the chief priests and elders

manipulated public opinion demanding the crucifixion of Christ and persuaded the crowd "to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed."

In *Twilight of a Great Civilization* Carl F. Henry observed that the majority opinion can be and often is wrong. American journalist Walter Lippman (1889-1974) did not have a high opinion of public opinion. He said that the public is incompetent to govern itself and does not even care to do so. A complex industrial society requires a government carried on by officials who would necessarily be guided either by public opinion or by expert knowledge. Lippman concluded that public opinion is unreliable because it can be united only by an appeal to slogans and "symbolic pictures." And not all opinions are equally valid or true. William Lee Miller, an American Protestant theologian and social philosopher, said that there is a line to be drawn between a healthy respect for other positions and the unhealthy assumption that all positions either are all on one plane and do not matter one way or another or are wholly matters of taste and background. Many public issues today are of such highly complicated character that they cannot be decided by a show of hands.

The word opinion reveals instability. We have an opinion if we don't have the know-how to make a judgment call. In other words, public opinion misses the element of divine revelation. A Christian view of opinion cannot rest on the belief that "value judgments" are mere preferences. An informed opinion must be grounded in Revelation, the Sacred Scriptures. Democracy needs the norms found in Scripture, in the Ten Commandments, in Biblical justice. Consequently, Christians might reasonably ask why the will of the public is more relevant to moral decisions than the will of God. So far, liberal theory has not presented an adequate answer. This reminds me of the last verse of the book of *Judges*: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

Johan D. Tangelder