A Social Psychological Perspective on Public Opinion

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Psychology 335

Central Question for this Course

• Why do people believe what they do about politics and political issues?
• What is public opinion?
• What factors influence public opinion?
• How does psychology help us understand the political process?

What is a social psychological perspective?

• The study of behavior as a result of situational influences,
• Interacting with personality characteristics
• For example,
• A specific political communication (the President says there is a threat to our nation) may be more effective with individuals who are high in authoritarianism or personal insecurity

Person by Situation Interaction

Attitudes: perception of threat

High authoritarians

Low authoritarians

No speech Speech

What is public opinion?

• Construct—not real
• Public
  – Dispersed (geographically)
  – Interested in and divided over an issue over time
  – Has view toward affecting future course of action
• Opinion—“complex value, belief calculations that establish a fit between outer world and life experience” (Bennett)

Fishbein-Ajzen model—Theory of Reasoned Action

• Complex belief value calculation
• Beliefs are translated into attitudes through values
• Attitude = \( \sum (b_i \times e_i) \)
### Fishbein and Ajzen

- Probability (p) that each belief is accurate (my own judgment)
  - Belief₁: GWB fights terrorism (p=0.5)
  - Belief₂: GWB helps education (p=0.3)
  - Belief₃: GWB helps wealthy people (p=0.9)
- Evaluation of belief (-5 to 5)
  - e₁ = 3
  - e₂ = 5
  - e₃ = -4

\[
\text{Attitude} = (0.5)(3) + (0.3)(5) + (0.9)(-4) = 1.5 + 1.5 + (-3.6) = -0.6 \text{ [negative attitude]}
\]

### Situational Perspective on Public Opinion (Bennett)

- Philip Converse: Non-attitudes of Mass Public
- State of consciousness fallacy: public is a stable entity that changes little in composition from one situation to another;
  - Is public opinion informed?
  - Is public opinion stable?
  - Is public opinion consistent?
  - From the state of consciousness perspective, these questions make sense; HOWEVER,
- Situational perspective: public as a collection of individuals who actually form and express opinions on a specific issue at a particular time
- This perspective recognizes many conditions which may affect development and expression of public opinion

### Situational Perspective

- The composition of the “public” may change in different political situations
- The amount of the public’s information, stability and consistency of attitudes may all change, depending on different political situations
- In order to understand the importance of public opinion in the political system, it is important to be clear that
  - 1) different people may be active at different times
  - 2) political communication may have a profound effect upon opinions
  - 3) political institutions affect individuals’ thoughts and actions [often mediated through the mass media—Edelman]

### 8th Grade Model of Democracy

- Theories of democracy (8th grade): public officials assess public opinion (how their constituents feel), then implement policy [see graph]
- This theory requires that the public
  - Be informed
  - Have stable attitudes
  - Be consistent
- Many critics like political scientist Philip Converse argue the public has “non-attitudes”—implying elites should make decisions
- However, it is meaningless to argue that a government can only be as democratic as the consciousness of the people allows, if the structure and operation of government affects opinion situations and consequently the consciousness of the public

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**Notes:**
- Image details show a page from a document discussing public opinion and democratic theory, with references to Fishbein and Ajzen, and Situational Perspective on Public Opinion by Bennett. The 8th Grade Model of Democracy is also illustrated, emphasizing the role of public opinion in democratic processes.
Modified Model of Democracy

Dynamic model of attitude formation/public opinion

The beliefs to be used in the formulation:

\[ \text{Attitude} = \sum (b_i) \times (e_i) \]

are situationally affected—that is, what beliefs an individual uses in the cognitive calculation of his/her attitudes depends upon situational influences (e.g., the government and the media).