Measurement of Public Opinion
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Psychology 335

Ways to measure public opinion

• A. Survey Data
• B. Other techniques
  – Snowball sample
  – Voting Data
  – Unobtrusive measures

Survey Data

• Most commonly used measure of public opinion
• Important to remember: Not necessarily the same

Survey Data--potential problems

• Reliability
• Sampling
• Question wording

Access to Public Opinion Data

IRSS database
  – http://www.irss.unc.edu/odum/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=140

UMB Library
  – www.lib.umb.edu
    • LexisNexis Academic
    • Reference
    • Polls/surveys
Survey Data problems

- Reliability
  - Most attitude scales social psychologists use have multiple measures
  - Public opinion questions often measured with just a single question
- Sampling
- Question wording

Survey Data problems

- Reliability
- Sampling
  - Sampling error a function of sample size
  - Biased sample selection
- Question wording

Question Wording

- Two different forms of the question:
  - If a situation like Vietnam were to develop in another part of the world, do you think the United States should or should not send troops?
  - If a situation like Vietnam were to develop in another part of the world, do you think the United States should or should not send troops to stop a Communist take-over?

Response to “Another Vietnam” by wording of question—SRC data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1974 Fall</th>
<th>Original wording</th>
<th>To stop a take-over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send troops</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not send troops</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>66.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1976 February</th>
<th>Send troops</th>
<th>To stop a take-over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send troops</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not send troops</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>72.1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1978 Fall</th>
<th>Send troops</th>
<th>To stop a take-over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send troops</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not send troops</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Sampling

- Probability sample most common
- *Snowball sample*—sampling an elite or some group where probability sample would be a waste
- Interviews individual and asks them for recommendation of three people to interview
- Eventually you exhaust the population when no new names are suggested
- Potential problems: you need to get into the network at the right place, and you can get stuck in some sub-network

Voting data

- Blunt instrument
- Vote decision is complex and difficult to interpret
- For example, what was meaning of Reagan’s election in 1980?
- Political struggle to interpret its meaning

Unobtrusive Measures

- Gene Webb—Non-reactive measures in the social sciences
- Archival data
- Museum tile wear for pictures
- If wanted to measure alcohol consumption and suspected a norm of not admitting level of drinking, could instead do:
  - Garbology: probability sample of trash can on Sunday morning

Bottom line in measurement

- Need to get as many indicators as possible to really understand what is going on