

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN THE U.S - SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR VIETNAM

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In the framework of cooperation, exchange of research at George Washington University on public opinion research, the author introduces and analyzes some results of public opinion research in the U.S in recent decades; thereby gives some suggestions for public opinion research in Vietnam today to discuss with readers.

I. Public opinion research in the U.S

1. For Americans, when it comes to public opinion research, it is about public opinion polls. “U.S today is overwhelmed with public opinion polls” (Herbert Asher, 2012, p.1; Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012, p.2).

Since 1952, in the 15th anniversary of *Public Opinion Quarterly* journal, political scientist Philip Converse noted that “opinion polls were public opinion”. According to Adam Berinsky, this view is “absolutely shared by scientists recently on public opinion”. Indeed, he said, “when scientists talk about public opinion, they always think about the poll results” (Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012, p.2).

In all aspects, whatever Americans are interested in will be polled and answered by public opinion research centers, especially in political aspect. For Americans, the issues which are often

asked and looked for answers are related to the operation of the government. For example: Who has the ability to win and become the President in the election? Will Democratic or Republican party hold a majority in the Senate/House of Representatives? During the ruling, for each policy made, what percentage of voters will President have? What are the percentages of Republicans and Democrats supporting policy for coming year presented to Congress by President? Does the U.S need to deploy combat troops in Syria?... All these questions are answered quickly by figures from the results of public opinion polls (Barbara A. Bardes and Robert W. Oldendick, 2007; Herbert Asher, 2012).

In contrast, entrepreneurs, politicians are also interested in the polls to assess the prospects of voters who will vote for

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them before deciding whether or not to participate in the race to a certain position. Many people will make decisions on career and economic activities based on the results of the polls.

Besides political polls, there are polls on implementing economic policies, reorganization of health protection, immigration issues, public policy issues (such as abortion, reorganization of education, deficit spending, environment...) Or simply, what kind of alcoholic beverage does American like? Who will win American Idol?...

Not only conducting opinion polls in the country, the U.S has extended the implementation of polls around the world. The international polls let Americans know the views of people around the world towards the U.S and its activities, especially in popular culture and diplomatic policy. Originally, the polls were carried out mainly in the countries of North America and Europe (EU), later they are extended to countries in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

With the results of the polls on the U.S' combat in Iraq in 2002 and 2003, many Americans were surprised by the objection attitude of people in allies such as Germany and France. Or through polls in Lebanon in 2006, American knew that the majority of Lebanese did not believe the U.S acting as mediator honestly in the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel...

Berinsky said, the reason people are interested in public opinion "because it

has the strongest influence on daily life of everyone" (Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012). Earlier, in his work, Bogardus noted, public opinion "builds and destroys reputations, organizes and maintains happy society, makes and repeals laws, builds and destroys/erodes the society and ethical standards, add strength or takes away vitality and spirit of the community" (Emory S. Bogardus, 1951, p.1).

Despite of not being the country initiating public opinion research, throughout the 20th century until now, the U.S is seen as one of the leading countries in these researches, both theoretically and practically. There are many famous public opinion research organizations which we have heard such as: National Council on Public Polls - NCPP, American Association for Public Opinion Research - AAPOR; World Association for Public Opinion Research - WAPOR; Program on International Policy Attitudes - PIPA; Roper Center for Public Opinion Research - ROPER; National Opinion for Research Center - NORC,... Especially, Gallup – a famous American private research organization – has been known worldwide.

2. Although Europe is the origin of public opinion research, works and veteran researchers in public opinion are from the U.S. Some famous authors and works on public opinion to mention such as: *Public Opinion* (1922), by Walter Lippmann (1997 with 12th Edition); *An Introduction Public Opinion* (1940), by Harwood L. Childs; *A theory of public opinion* (1962), by Francis Graham

Wilson (2013 with 14th Edition); *Public Opinion Polling: A handbook for Public Interest and Citizen Advocacy Groups* (1987), by Clinda C. Lake with Pat C. Harper; *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know* (1992), by Herbert Asher (2012 with Eighth Edition); *The Public Opinion Process: How the People Speak* (1997), by Irving Crespi; *Public Opinion*, by Carroll J. Glynn and others (2004 with Second Edition); *Public Opinion in 21st Century: Let the People Speak* (2006), by Russell Brooker and Todd Schaefer; *Opinion Polls and the Media: Reflecting and Shaping Public Opinion* (2012), Edited by Chritina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback; *New Directions in Public Opinion* (2012), Edited by Adam J. Berinsky and others, etc. The most recent is the work *New Directions in American*. Under the auspices of the Government to deploy, the book *New Directions in Public Opinion* was published in 2012 edited by Adam J. Berinsky and colleagues. This book is considered the standard work on the direction of public opinion in the present time.

The leading journal for public opinion research, *Public Opinion Quarterly* was established in 1937 for the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) has published the Volume 78/Number 2/Summer 2014.

These public opinion works tries to express on many fields:

- + To study some of the important aspects of history and present situations of the idea, or concept of public opinion today. To provide an enduring critique

and refutation of excesses of the behaviorist impulse, while affirming the historical and theoretical significance of the idea of public opinion for popular rule (Graham F. Wilson, 1962).

- + Public opinion as expression of the popular will and public opinion as a process of communication between leaders. They call this theme the *democratic dialogue*. The proper role of the public in democratic government in theory and practice, that in history namely "Vox Populu, Vox Dei" is the voice of the people the voice of God, or at least the voice of reason and wisdom? (Russell Brooker and Todd Schaefer, 2006).

- + To introduce for schools in different intellectual traditions, found on common ground, intrigued by the elusive of public opinion; and struck by the degree of methodological homogeneity which seemed to characterize the area of study even as copious reviews of literature cautioned that "public opinion" was a term with an ultiplicity of meanings. (Theodore L. Glasser and Salmon, Charles T., 1995).

- + To introduce public opinion researches from many disciplines; the basic ones, however, are political science and sociology but it had borrowed a great deal of social psychology and a smattering of biology, anthropology, and economics (Bernard Hennessy, 1985).

- + To help readers to become better consumers of polls on public issues (Herbert Asher, 2012)

- + To construct public opinion, in two different senses: 1) public opinion is

constructed through the technology of polling and by the news media that report and interpret polls, and concerned with how public opinion is represented; 2) the roles played by media and by political elites in shaping public opinion (Justin Lewis, 2001).

+ To present an account of the role of public opinion in the democratic politics of the US (Robert S. Erikson and Kent L. Tedin, 2005).

+ To provide information and characteristics on how survey data are collected or demonstrate various ways in which public opinion data are used; and the public opinion in democratic system, and how it is translated into public policy (Barbara A. Bardes and Robert W. Oldendick, 2007).

+ To help one's interest plan and complete a professional poll, and become a wise consumer of polls (Clinda C. Lake with C. Pat Harper, 1987).

+ To expand the audience for cutting edge public opinion research by providing an accessible and coherent overview of the current state of field - *New Directions in Public opinion* (Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012).

+ So on...

II. Views on public opinion in the U.S

1. Debates about the definition of public opinion

Public opinion is considered by scientists as "one of the most diversify and varying in political science" (Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012, p.1). Currently, there are many definitions of public opinion, under many difference

approaches, inconsistent, co-existing, because each definition can satisfy some specific purposes of public opinion in the view of who implements.

Considering theoretically, the problem here is the combination of two terms: "opinion" and "public". How the word *public* can be understood is the interesting formation of the word *opinion*.

In historically, there has been the Round Table on Political Statistics at the Chicago, September 8-12, 1924, brought public opinion matters discussed many times but have failed to agree on: some members believed that there is no such thing as public opinion; others believes in its existence but doubted their ability to define it with sufficient precision for scientific purposes. Others again, more sanguine or perhaps more credulous, believed that the term could be defined, but were of different minds concerning the kind of definition that should be adopted. To reconcile these different views, the Round Table decided: firstly, the natural origin of the word "opinion" in general needs to be considered and hope that a general understanding of the meaning of the phrase "public opinion" will be clearer. Lastly, the definition of opinion is agreed by the Round Table to narrow to three points: (1) opinion is not required to be the result of a rational process, (2) opinion does not include individual knowing about choices, and (3) opinion is clear enough or the definition can create a tendency to act upon it in favorable situations.

The Round Table was also unable to come to a definite conclusion for public opinion. The main points of

disagreement were as follows: (1) whether there is and must of necessity be a single public opinion, or whether *there* may be a number of public opinions upon a given question; (2) whether opinion is public because of the subject-matter to which it relates or of the kind of persons who hold it; (3) what part of the public must concur in an opinion to make it public opinion; and (4) must there be acquiescence by those who do not concur. After some discussion of these points, it was agreed that an exact definition of public opinion might not be needed until after the technical problem of measuring the opinions of the individual members of the public had been disposed of. (Holcombe, 1925 and Robert, 1928).

While it may be difficult to come to a consensus on a single definition of public opinion, Key V.O. (1963) ultimately arrived at a working view of public opinion that, "Those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed." (Barbara A. Bardes and Robert W. Oldendick, 2007: 2). Key's definition is an expansive one. Public opinion is a property of individuals, but acquires its power in the public sphere. Moreover, there is a place both for the strongly formed, crystallized opinions of citizens that we might think of as reasoned public opinion and the lightly held beliefs and transient preferences that are decried by politicians and journalists as fickle judgments, but which sometimes guide government.

Continuing to look for another reasonable definition, after synthesizing

a system of definitions of public opinion of Valdimer O. Key (1967, p.4), Monroe (1975, p.6), Simon (1974, p.7), Hennessy (1981, p.4), Erikson and Tedin (2001, p.7), Wise (1974, p.168), Noelle-Neumann (1984, p.62-63), and Weissberg (1976, p.9)... Bardes and Oldendick said, definitions all have a common element, each difference reflects differences of view, scope and importance of the study of this phenomenon. Thereby, they made the definition: "Public opinion is the aggregate of the views of individual adults on matters of public interest" (Barbara A. Bardes and Robert W. Oldendick, 2007, p.5). *The first element* of this definition emphasizes the "aggregate of the views of individual adults" is the origin of the debate on public opinion research in the U.S, it is different from personal opinion. *The second element*, the meaning of the phrase "of individual adults" comes from the center which we aim at to be the role of public opinion in the political process; based on the rights and obligations to the society. *The last element*, "matters of public interest", here is the acceptance of an extremely wide basic approach – all matters of public interest.

In fact, there are many different views, approaches in the definition of public opinion, but each definition, whether made before or after, has certain rationality and it is very difficult to assess which one is more reasonable. Thus, like Bardes and Oldendick, after studying views on public opinion of Jean Jaccques Rousseau (1712-1778), James Madison (1751-1836),

MacKinnon (1828), Lawrence Lowell (1913), Walter Lippmann (1922), Leonard W. Doob (1948), David Truman (1951), Arthur Kornhauser (1950), v.v... Hennessy "projected" a definition: *Public opinion is the complex of preferences expressed by a significant number of persons on an issue of general importance*. He gave 5 elements of this definition as: 1) The presence of the issue, which is the consensus agreement among scholars on gathering public opinion on the issue. 2) The origin of the public, there has to be a group noting people related to the issue, they are the *public* of opinion. 3) The complexity of public preferences, it means all imagination and measurement of relevant personal opinion held by the public on all intentions of the issue covered. 4) The opinion indication of different views gathered around the issue, the division of minority – majority is a special case of democratic decision-making. 5) The number of people involved, is the public force who is interested in the issue (Bernard Hennessy, 1985, p.8-14).

Besides definition of the term "public opinion", other terms related to public opinion are also assigned by researchers in details, such as: opinion, attitudes, majority opinion, minority opinion, beliefs, values, public, general public, groups, gossiping group...

2. Debates about method

In the studies of public opinion of American scientists, the presentation of *methodology* does not show the distinctiveness, clarity, most of them refer to specific method to implement

polls in practice, such as: face-to-face or door-to-door, telephone interviews, mail surveys, Internet surveys, exit polls... Therefore, as mentioned above, since 1952, Philip Converse concluded that "opinion polls were public opinion". And "this view is absolutely shared by scientists recently on public opinion" (Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012, p.2). This is not acknowledged recently, but previously, in his famous work, Wilson also admitted that "the majority of current public interests is on the development of methods and techniques" (Graham F. Wilson, 1962, p.73).

That public opinion polling is a growth industry in the United States is undeniable. The polls most familiar to Americans are those conducted for and reported by the major communications media. For example, major television networks often sponsor polls in collaboration with a print news organization: CBS News with the New York Times, ABC News with the Washington Post, and NBC News with the Wall Street Journal. Other collaborations exist between print media and electronic media with particular polling organizations: Fox News and Opinion Dynamics, USA Today and the Gallup Organization, and CNN and Opinion Research Corporation. These media-sponsored poll often become an integral part of the print or electronic news story that the media outlet procedures. Likewise, the major newsmagazines often incorporate polling information in their news stories. So far, public opinion polls in the U.S are still being conducted in the methods:

face-to-face or door-to-door, telephone interviews, mail surveys, Internet surveys, exit polls..., of which, the most widely used method is telephone interview. The diversity of methods makes public opinion research a particularly interesting area (interest) of political science, but the implementation, use of methods still depend heavily on funding of the poll.

3. Background and changes in method of public opinion research in the U.S

The modern polling period started during the 1930s in the USA, ignoring the straw polls of various forms that had been conducted in the preceding century. The early `mode of interviewing was face-to-face interviews in people's homes. The interviewer was primarily female, and they had a number of respondent selections through quota methods that they must meet. They typically worked under a regional supervisor who received the study materials from the central office, distributed them and returned them to a location in the New York, Princeton or Denver. (Michael Traugott (2012), p.69-70)

In the early days of surveys, pollsters went door-to-door to interview survey respondents. Beginning in the 1970s, the industry started conducting polls by telephone, a cheaper and more convenient form of data collection that facilitated an explosion in the number of polls in the US. In recent year, however, this model of data collection has been threatened on several fronts. For one, the rise in the use of cell phones puts the representativeness of phone polls at risk.

Over a quarter of all Americans have dropped their land lines in favor of a cell phone and these numbers are growing, especially among younger Americans. As of December 2010, more than half of Americans aged 25 to 29 lived in households that had a cell phone but no traditional land line telephone (S. Blumberg, Julian Luke, Gestur Davidson, Michel Davern, Tzy-Chyi Yu, and Kare Soderberg. (2007) "Wireless Substitution: State-level Estimates From the National Health Interview Survey, January-December 2007." National Health Statistics Report 14). Polling exclusively through land lines will therefore miss a large portion of the citizens that comprise the mass public. In addition, the Internet holds promise as a method of data collection but, as Hillygus notes, it is difficult to translate the time-tested mechanics of collecting opinions to this new medium. For instance, it is almost impossible to define the universe of Internet users, making it a challenge to draw representative samples. (Adam J. Berinsky, 2012, p.3).

In theory, using cell phones to contact respondents up new possibilities for survey research. However, regulations in the USA inhibit the use of cell phones since it is illegal to dial a cell phone number from a computer (the way most RDD samples are deployed), because both caller and recipient pay according to the American billing algorithm. In order to employ cell phone samples, pollsters have had to dial numbers by hand, often move to systems of prior contact in order to get approval for an interview and offer

a financial incentive to offset the cost of the call for the respondent. As a result, it is estimated that a cell phone interview costs at least twice as much as a landline interview in the same study (AAPOR, 2010, p.11). Consequently, American government has made new policy on cell phone charge, calls will be charged from the beginning of ringing, while limiting bluff calls, it requires researchers to consider before choosing samples for interview.

Thence, Commissioned Polls activities appear notable. Although polls by the big news organizations seem the most prominent, they are only a tiny fraction of the public opinion polling done in the United States. Many other organizations commission polls for purposes other than informing citizens. For example, companies may hire a polling firm to gauge the public response to their products, and academic investigators may use surveys in their research. The results of those polls may not attract much public notice, but they still can affect the lives of citizens.

Even so, in the United States are also not spared from the phenomenon *Fundraising under the guise of surveying* (FRUGging), *Selling under the guise of research* (SUGging) and Pseudopolls (Herbert Asher, 2012, p.8).

The last debate is that, as Hillygus to claims that, no survey is perfect, but by making the decisions that go into collecting survey data more transparent, it is possible for policy makers, journalists, and ordinary citizens to decide how much faith to put

into any single measure of the public will (Adam J. Berinsky and others, 2012, p.4).

III. Suggestions for Vietnam

1. Awareness of the role of public opinion and existing studies

In a certain extent, leaders in Vietnam to date, in the form of documents or conversations, all confirm and highly rate the role of public opinion.

Public opinion research has been mentioned in Vietnam since the 80s of 20th century, marked by the establishment of Institute for Social opinion under Central Committee for Ideology and Culture (currently Central Committee for Propaganda and Education), however, the existence of this agency and some public opinion research organizations are still little-known.

People are still reluctant to mention public opinion, thus the title of the research, capture of public opinion still has many problems in terms of the State. Despite of highly rating public opinion or knowing its power, many officials still avoid public opinion. Therefore, the results of public opinion research do not come to life in order to promote the effective implementation of its functions, roles, because in terms of the State, we have not had institutions actually regulating the validity of results of the research, capture of public opinion. How to public and use public opinion polling data have not been agreed and most of them are still in "secret".

In terms of scientists, the professionalism or appearance of individuals who have depth studies on public opinion is still very rare to date,

there has not been any breakthrough or significant work.

2. Regarding research method

The mostly conducted public opinion polling method in Vietnam is still face-to-face or door-to-door or giving sheets - Anket (these methods are considered the most expensive ones in the U.S); besides, there has been some simple polls on the Internet through online newspaper. We can say that, in Vietnam, polling by telephone interviews, exit polls is not common; mail survey is also very rare. Meanwhile, telephone interview is the most popular method in the U.S which has been conducted since 1970 until now.

3. Some recommendations

- First of all, in order for applied researches on public opinion in Vietnam to be convincing, it needs to implement basic researches, have system of public opinion theory. The basic researches on theory must be consistent with Vietnamese culture and traditional values.
- Currently, techniques of public opinion polling methods have been studied, presented in scientists' works on public opinion very specifically. There are many specialized in-depth works studying and analyzing polling techniques, such as: *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know* (Herbert Asher, 2012); *Public Opinion: Measuring the American Mind* (Barbara A. Bardes and Robert W. Oldendick, 2007); *Opinion Polls and the Media: Reflecting and Shaping Public Opinion* (Chritina Holtz-Bacha and Jesper Stromback 2012); *Public Opinion Polling: A handbook for Public Interest and Citizen Advocacy Groups* (Clinda C.

Lake with C. Part Harper 1987); *Methodological Trends and Controversies in the Media's Use of Opinion Polls* (Michael Traugott, 2012)... Hence, these works need to be translated strictly to have the basis for long-term use.

- The importance is to have a complete legal system with the main law namely Law on Referendum. Law on Referendum is the legal basis for public opinion research; and moreover, the right of people (the citizenry) to approve has to be asserted in the Constitution as the fundamental Social contract □

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