Understanding Public Opinion in Social Science Research

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Abstract:- The concept of public opinion, deeply rooted in historical origins and evolving through centuries, has been a subject of scholarly debate. This paper traces the historical development of the term 'public opinion' from its early connotations to its current complexities, exploring its conceptualization, evolution, and debates. Scholars' perspectives, ranging from Rousseau to Locke and anti-democratic thinkers like Plato and Aristotle constitute are discussed to understand the meaning and evolution of the term public opinion.

The objective of this paper is to explore the meaning, type and essence what constitute the term 'public' and 'opinion'. It majorly relies on the work of Price to understand the how the term public and opinion are constituted and evolved in the democratic societies and also distinguishes how the term opinion and attitude in the larger spectrum. Elaborating the formation of opinion this paper explores the role of schemata, values, and group identification. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the impact of immediate stimuli in social settings on the expression of opinions, highlighting the dynamic nature of opinion formation.

The last part of the paper highlights conceptualization of 'Public Opinion', its historical and contextual evolution since 18th century and the influence of intellectuals such as Madison, Bentham, and Mill. It also emphasizes the role of American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) in the development of the discipline of public opinion across the regions in 20th century. Finally this paper highlights the relevance of public opinion research in the contemporary democratic settings and challenges in pursuing objectivity in this domain. Methodologically this paper relies on exploratory and comparative analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Public opinion, a pivotal concept in the realm of social sciences, traces its historical roots to the era of Rousseau, gaining prominence with the advent of survey research in the early 19th century. The definition of public opinion remains a subject of scholarly contention, with Childs (1939) characterizing it as "a simple aggregation of individual views" (Price 1992, p. 2). The historical antecedents of the concept, however, diverge from ancient Greek political thought, where the collective or aggregative perspective was marginalized and criticized by luminaries such as Plato and Aristotle. Their anti-democratic stance posited that expert opinions superseded those of the masses,

viewing the amalgamation of 'public' and 'opinion' as yielding either common sense or nonsense.

Vincent Price notes that it was only during the liberal and democratic philosophies of the 1700s that attempts were made to reconcile these terms in a different light (Price 1992, p. 6). Locke, in particular, imbued the term 'opinion' with significance, aligning it with expert views, a departure from the ancient Greek philosophers' interpretation.

The term 'public,' on the other hand, has undergone various historical interpretations, often aligning with the collective will of the people. Price elucidates that the term 'public' originally connoted both 'of the people' (referring to common access) and 'for the people' (referring to the common good), evolving over time to signify 'by the people' (carried out by the common people, as understood today) (Price 1992, p. 8). Thus, 'public' and 'opinion' exhibit distinct conceptual and historical trajectories, with the amalgamation into 'public opinion' receiving academic attention only in the first half of the 20th century.

To unravel the historical development of the concept of 'public opinion,' a comprehensive exploration of the evolution, conceptualization, and debates surrounding the terms 'public' and 'opinion' becomes imperative.

II. THE CONCEPTION OF PUBLIC

The notion of public has been scrutinized through various lenses, including crowd, mob, citizen, people, mass, and group. In public opinion research, the categorization of the public varies based on research objectives, methods, and contexts. Some view the public as the entire geographical population, while others restrict it to those informed about a specific issue. Further distinctions emerge concerning religion, caste, gender, region, or other identity parameters.

Vincent Price identifies several types of public, one being the 'General Public.' Allport's (1937) definition, as highlighted by Price, characterizes the general public as "a population defined by geographical, community, political jurisdiction, or other limits" (Price 1992, p. 36). This encompassing definition, dominating societal and academic discourse, has faced challenges. Scholars like Gallup, Roper, Archibald, and Price advocate for an inclusive approach, considering all members of society in a populist and democratic manner. In contrast, Bryce, Lippmann, Neuman, and Key argue that not all individuals are sufficiently informed or potential respondents for research on specific issues (Price 1992, Pp. 36-37).

A. The Voting Public

Within the taxonomy of publics, the Voting Public stands as a paramount category, representing the electorate in democratic societies. This constituency comprises citizens who have acquired the right to vote and are duly enlisted in the electoral roll issued by the government. It serves as a crucial operational definition in the realm of research, effectively sieving out uninformed masses from analyses concerning issues that shape the government. In both pre and post-polling surveys, the Voting Public is utilized as the universe for research endeavors. However, the qualification as a member of the Voting Public does not guarantee an individual's comprehensive awareness of the issues under scrutiny in surveys or research.

B. The Attentive Public

The Attentive Public encompasses individuals possessing substantial information and a likelihood of responding to specific issues. Devine's observations indicate that only 70% of voters occasionally and 50% are predominantly attentive voters (Price 1992, p. 38). This segment is well-informed and actively engages in political matters through debates and the dissemination of awareness. As Lippmann (1925) contends, the Attentive Public comprises those who consistently pay attention to public affairs, engage thoughtfully with public issues, and occasionally discuss these matters with others (Price 1992, Pp. 38-39). Devine, employing five survey measures in an American context, identifies the Attentive Public based on reported interest in politics, interest in national election campaigns, discussions about politics, exposure to newspaper news about politics, and reading about politics in magazines. In the Indian context, additional spaces beyond traditional media, such as tea shops, common meeting places, lunch breaks, and informal social gatherings, contribute to the identification of the Attentive Public.

C. The Active Public

Approximately 15% of the Attentive Public, as identified by Neuman, constitutes the Active Public. The distinction between political activists and the Active Public is nuanced, with Price noting that the engagement of this group in political affairs spans formal means of participation, such as monetary contributions, organizational memberships, and attendance at rallies, as well as active informal participation in public discussions and debates (Price 1992, p. 40). The Elite Public, exemplified by political activists, affluent capitalists, funders, religious and social organizations, and certain educational communities, embodies the epitome of the Active Public in the Indian context.

D. Issue Public:

While the aforementioned categories delineate levels of awareness and participation in political affairs, the Issue Public is characterized by its focus on specific matters. It can encompass individuals from all the above categories depending on the nature of the issue at hand, resulting in four varieties: Issue General Public, Issue Voting Public, Issue Attentive Public, and Issue Active Public. Notably, Price provides in-depth elucidation on the last two types of Issue Public. By way of illustration, a query regarding the method of crop harvesting posed to the general populace may yield a high percentage of uninformed responses, yet the same question posed to attentive farmers significantly diminishes the likelihood of uninformed or inattentive responses.

In short, these four categories collectively contribute to the formation of public opinion, delineating a journey from the amorphous concept of Mass to the nuanced construct of the Public. Subsequent sections will delve into a brief review of the idea of Public, followed by an exploration of the types and definitions of Opinion.

III. WHAT CONSTITUTES OPINION?

The interchangeability of the terms "opinion" and "attitude" has been a notable phenomenon in academic, particularly psychological, discourse, as well as in practical discussions within society. The systematic exploration of opinions garnered increased attention from researchers and policymakers during the early 1900s, coinciding with advancements in scientific techniques. Notably, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed an accelerated adoption of survey techniques to measure opinions and attitudes. A significant milestone in this domain was marked by Gallup, Crossley, and Roper's pioneering study, aimed at enhancing the accuracy of predicting the 1936 American Presidential election. Subsequent to this endeavor, the establishment of the Public Opinion Quarterly in 1937 and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) a decade later underscored the growing significance of opinion research.

The historical trajectory of the concepts of opinion and attitude reveals a close interrelation. Doob (1948) defines public opinion as "attitudes on an issue when individuals are members of the same social group" (Doob 1948, p.35), while Childs (1965) characterizes opinion as "an expression of attitude in words" (Childs 1965, p. 13). Despite the interchangeability in some literature, a nuanced distinction persists. Opinion is often associated with observable and verbal manifestations, involving conscious expressions of support or opposition contingent on situational and behavioral contexts. Conversely, attitude is construed as covert and psychological, translating affective cognition into preferences or aversions, with global relevance and independence from contextual factors. In the realm of researching or studying public opinion, the data on these two terms frequently converge, interdependently shaping the understanding of public sentiment.

Vincent Price introduces a threefold categorization of opinion, encompassing expression, thoughtfulness, and the adaptation of attitudes towards specific issues. Expressive opinion hinges on the notion that a person may hold a judgment internally without expressing it, emphasizing that an unexpressed opinion lacks the essence of opinion unless articulated. Despite a definitional commitment to overt expressions, analysts acknowledge the existence of unexpressed, private, internal, and latent opinions (Price 1992, p. 47). The second category, opinion as thoughtful, distinguishes itself from attitude by emphasizing the decision content, transforming opinion into a realm of

rationalization and thoughtfulness. While the inculcation of attitude involves liking or disliking, thoughtfulness over one's attitude and its culmination results in the emergence of an opinion. The third category, adaptation of attitude, signifies the outcome of attitude processes on a specific issue, conceptualizing opinion as a product of attitude. In the realm of psychology, opinions are further classified into overt and covert opinions, both of which can be effectively captured through survey research.

IV. OPINION FORMATION

The advancement of tools and methodologies in opinion research has given rise to various theoretical concepts aiming to expound on the intricate nature of opinions and the underlying processes. In his exploration of opinion formation, Vincent Price meticulously examines three crucial concepts: Schemata, values, and group identification. These concepts share common traits:

- *Inferred Nature*: They are deduced from cognitive processes rather than directly observed.
- *Foundational Role*: Considered more basic and foundational than opinions, which are perceived as situational and superficial.
- *Theoretical Explanations*: Employed as theoretical frameworks to elucidate overt expressions of opinion (Price 1992, p. 52).

Schemata, as defined by Fiske & Taylor, represent a cognitive structure embodying one's general knowledge about a given concept or stimulus domain. Encompassing basic conceptual information and its interrelation with other concepts, schemata play a pivotal role in connecting diverse information to form an opinion. They also guide the interpretation of information, influencing the selection of data aligned with existing schemata (Fiske & Taylor 1991). Consequently, the content, format, design, and illocutionary forces of news dissemination shape schemata and therefore public opinion (Fiske & Taylor 1991).

The second category, values, is inherently prescriptive and functions in evaluating opinions at the final stage of formation. Diverging from attitudes, which constitute bundles of beliefs, values serve as guiding beliefs steering opinions toward their endpoint and shaping modes of conduct. Values are inherently tied to goals (terminal values) and processes (instrumental values) designed to achieve those goals (Rokeach 1973).

The third category influencing opinion formation revolves around the individual's relation to self-respect, identity, or group identification. Social identity emerges as a pivotal factor filtering the value system and ultimately determining individual opinion. Price contends that social identification plays a central role in forming opinions on public issues, particularly within the "conflict system" of elite politics (Price 1992, p. 57). Consequently, group identity stands as a paramount factor in shaping public opinion and decisions.

Studies, such as those conducted by Converse, underscore the significance of group identity, with 50% of respondents affirming allegiance to their group identity compared to 3% or 4% expressing adherence to abstract ideologies like liberal or conservative. This phenomenon is evident in Indian politics, where caste identity often dictates voting patterns—a topic that will be further explored in subsequent chapters.

In short, these categories function as information centers continuously connecting and formulating opinions within individuals. The expression of the entire process of opinion formation by individuals or the public is often triggered by immediate stimuli such as discussions, processions, informal conversations, or social settings like gatherings over drinks or tea. In the Indian context, the expression of public opinion is notably observed in tea and pan shops, evening gatherings among friends, canteens, and increasingly on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Before delving into the details of public opinion formation, functioning, and impacts, a brief exploration of the history of the term "public opinion" will be undertaken in the following section.

V. UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC OPINION

The conceptualization of "Public Opinion" has evolved over time, intricately connected to historical events and literary developments. The term itself, referring to the collective viewpoint of the people, gained prominence in English and French writings during the first half of the 18th century. Scholars like Habermas and Ozouf emphasize the significant role of French intellectuals in shaping the essence of the public sphere, common will, public spirit, and general will, culminating in the concept of public opinion as 'publicness' developed in French societies (Habermas 1989 and Ozouf 1988).

The emergence of the public sphere in political discourse can be traced back to influential forces such as the printing technique in the 15th century, the growth of business and merchant classes, and the acceleration of Protestant reforms in the 16th century. These developments led to the establishment of spheres and ideas independent of Church dominance and religious interventions. The professionalization of arts, the rise of reading clubs, the publication of moral literature, and challenges posed by Martin Luther and Calvin to ecclesiastical authority all contributed to the development of capitalism and the emergence of independent social institutions in Europe, particularly in England, by the early 18th century (Habermas 1989).

Key institutions fostering the evolution of the essence, if not the explicit concept, of public opinion included "the coffee houses of England (2000 in London by the early 18th century), the salons of Paris, and the table societies of Germany" (Speier 1950). During this period, as Price underscores, Habermas noted the rational and egalitarian features of public opinion. Public opinion, during this epoch, was perceived as emanating from reasoned discourse, active conversation, and debate aimed at determining the common

will or general good—distinct from a mere clash of individual interests (Price 1992, p-10).

The 18th century witnessed a significant space allocated to debates and free discussions, freeing them from the shackles of domination. The ideas of freedom of expression, secularism, and the sovereignty of the public were integral to these debates. It marked a period when the concepts of individualism and public emerged concurrently, often in conflict—a dynamic that persisted into the 20th century.

In other words, the 18th century, public opinion was intricately linked to discussion, the free flow of information, and the reflection of the common good. It functioned as a powerful tribunal to scrutinize the actions of the state. Yet, aspects of our contemporary understanding of public opinion found their origins in later writings on representative democracy by figures like Madison, and English utilitarian theorists Bentham and Mill (Price 1992, p. 12). Minar characterizes public opinion for utilitarians as the agglomerate interests of the community, asserting that the utilitarian democratic model is the most characteristic modern outlook on public opinion (Price 1992, p. 13).

While Mill, Bentham, and Rousseau had differing perspectives on the evolution of public opinion, Rousseau, akin to Mill and Bentham, advocated for the regular publication of government activities to safeguard against the abuse of power and legitimize government rule.

From these explorations, it is evident that although the term "public opinion" was not commonly used in practical governmental practices and philosophical writings, its essence gained legitimacy and significance in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These developments in theoretical discourse accelerated the need for more empirical methods to explore public opinion. However, in the early 20th century, the focus shifted towards sociological and psychological concerns rather than political and philosophical ones. Analysts began to concentrate on understanding the social and behavioral aspects of public opinion (Price 1992, p. 15). Scholars like Binkley noted a shift in inquiry towards the function and powers of public opinion in society, the means of its modification or control, and the relative importance of emotional and intellectual factors in its formulation (Binkley 1928, p. 393).

This shift in focus and the changing political landscapes worldwide prompted the emergence of academic sub-disciplines such as collective behavior, social psychology, attitude and opinion research, propaganda analysis, political behavior, and mass communication research (Price: 1992, p-15). Presently, studies on public opinion have a much broader scope, impacting political, social, market, religious, economic, and spiritual domains, and vice versa.

VI. FORMATION AND EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC OPINION

The process of forming and expressing opinions on particular issues varies widely among the public. Consequently, opinions related to various issues can manifest in diverse forms and be assessed through quantitative or qualitative methods. Quantitative classification involves providing respondents with predetermined options for a specific question, as exemplified by the query, "Do you know about the Indian Prime Minister?"

Quantitative opinion classification includes responses such as:
- Yes,
- No,
- Don't Know,
- Cannot say or don't want to respond,
- No response.

The reasons behind these diverse responses can be explored through various avenues (Erikson, Robert, Luttbeg, and Tedin 2015, pp. 20-22). While these options help gauge the awareness level of respondents, they do not capture the depth of public opinion on a particular issue. Scholars like Schuman and Presser argue that providing options can constrain responses (Schuman and Presser 1981).

Conversely, qualitative classification of opinion involves open-ended questions that do not provide predefined options. For instance, asking, "Do you know about the Indian Prime Minister, or what do you know about the Indian Prime Minister?" elicits varied responses, ranging from basic knowledge to expert-level understanding (Erikson, Robert, Luttbeg, and Tedin 2015, Pp. 19-22). Understanding political information levels among the adult public, as discussed by Erikson et al., provides insights in the context of the United States.

The level of opinion holding, whether low or high, also depends on the specific issue being addressed. Price emphasizes certain criteria for observing "opinion holding," noting that changes in the interviewer's words, timing, actions, and gestures can influence public opinion and affect study outcomes. This consideration sets the stage for a clearer understanding of subsequent chapters.

A. Wording and Sentences:
The choice of words and sentence structure in a questionnaire significantly impacts public opinion. For example:
- Q. A. "Do you support demonetization brought by Prime Minister Narendra Modi?"
- Q. B. "Do you support demonetization?"

While these questions may seem similar, Q. A. is a double-barreled question, introducing both 'demonetization' and 'Modi' as stimuli. This complexity may lead to varied responses based on respondents' feelings towards each stimulus as also suggested by Price (1992).

B. Time and Issue

The timing of questions can influence responses. Asking the same questions immediately after a policy's inauguration may yield different responses compared to asking the same questions a year later.

Certain questions may attract higher responses, while others may lead to more skipped answers. For instance, questions about supporting terrorism in Kashmir may receive high participation, whereas questions about alternative forms of government if India were not a democracy may primarily attract responses from experts or attentive individuals.

C. Choice

The options given significantly shape public opinion. The dichotomous choice of supporting or opposing is common in public opinion research, and including options like 'don't know' allows respondents to abstain if they lack an opinion.

D. Depth of Knowledge

Public knowledge varies across issues, resulting in different types of opinions. Price outlines categories such as expert opinion, general or commonsensical opinion, wrong opinion, no opinion, and un-opinion, with the depth of knowledge varying based on the issue (Price 1992, p. 65).

E. Impact Factor

Opinions can range from intellectual analysis to future actions. While intellectual opinions may not translate into future applicability, political activists' opinions often lead to future action plans and involvement in day-to-day politics.

F. Contextual Settings

The formation of opinion also differs according to the context and circumstances. For example, as a researcher working on a project sponsored by the European Union and the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in the year 2014, I (accompanied by a female researcher from Kashmir University) was supposed to interview ex-militants in Jammu and Kashmir. As a non-Kashmiri residing in Delhi, the image of Kashmir I had in my mind included a picture of Dal Lake in Srinagar, snowfall, and icy mountains. During interviews and visits to different remote areas of Kashmir, I observed three responses to the 'no question asked' about 'what is the condition of the people in the area?' (Kumar 2014) The following were the responses:

➢ Case 1: Place: Srinagar and adjacent districts
Response: "Aap log kya jano hamari sthiti kaisi hai aap to Delhi se aaye ho na (Since you are from Delhi, how would you know - what is our condition?)"

➢ Case 2: Place: Kupwara region (which is closer to the border and known for insurgency)
Response: "Aap log kya jano hamari sthiti kaisi hai aap to Bharat se aaye ho na (Since you are from India, how would you know - what is our condition?)"

➢ Case 3: Place: Mini Knadhar (The place whose half area is in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, POK, and where Army and police rarely go)
Response: "Aap log kya jano hamari sthiti kaisi hai aap to Kashmir se aaye ho na (Since you are from Kashmir, how would you know - what is our condition?)" (Kumar 2014)

The above example from the field reveals a lot about the circumstances, society, history, culture, and politics, and how these factors construct the opinion of the people. In this context, Noelle-Neumann argues that a full understanding of public opinion is not possible unless and until the climate of opinion is also examined (Price 1992, p. 67).

Thus, the process of forming and expressing public opinion is complex and multifaceted, influenced by various factors ranging from wording and choices to the context and circumstances in which opinions are sought. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is crucial for meaningful research and analysis of public opinion.

VII. TYPES OF PUBLIC OPINION

The preceding discussion on the characteristics of forming and holding opinions provides valuable insights into the considerations essential for collecting public opinion. This examination serves as a foundation for crafting questionnaires, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. Building on these factors, various types of public opinion can be elucidated.

A. High-Low Rate Opinion:

The depth of opinion holding, whether low or high, is contingent upon the information available to respondents. The level of information is intricately linked to the issue at hand and the individual's interest. For instance, the study conducted by Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin focused on the American President Nixon's decision on Antibalistic Missiles. The findings revealed that 41% of the public had an opinion (23% aware and supported, 18% aware and opposed), while 59% had no opinion (28% aware but neutral, 31% unaware with no view). The scholars concluded that the "extremely low rate of opinion holding on ABM was largely because of the extreme complexity of the issue" (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 2015, p. 19-20). Thus, both the issue's complexity and the question's format significantly influence the opinion rate in survey research.

B. Nonopinion

Nonopinion refers to situations where individuals either choose not to express an opinion or genuinely lack a viewpoint on a particular issue. Understanding the factors contributing to nonopinion is crucial for researchers, shedding light on the limits of public awareness or interest in specific topics.

C. Doorstep Opinion

Doorstep opinions are spontaneous and immediate responses provided by individuals in everyday settings. These opinions are often shaped by the situational context and can offer valuable insights into the public's initial, unfiltered reactions to various issues. Studying doorstep opinions provides researchers with a unique perspective on

the immediate impact of events or policies on public sentiment.

In short, these types of public opinion, ranging from high-low rate opinions to non-opinions and doorstep opinions, showcase the nuanced nature of public sentiment. Researchers must consider these variations and factors when designing surveys or conducting studies to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the diverse opinions held by the public.

VIII. CHALLENGES TO THE STUDY OF PUBLIC OPINION

The principal challenge in the study of public opinion lies in reconciling two Enlightenment values: rational individual opinion and non-rational, emotional aspects of public opinion. The more concrete emphasis on the scientific investigation of public opinion began in the early 20th century. However, these investigations were also applied to the philosophical examination of the public conscience, thinking, and opinion. Over time, the study of public opinion has solidified its inevitability and growing significance, accompanied by a multitude of advancements in the analysis, tools, and techniques for understanding public opinion. Nevertheless, practitioners and analysts in the field of public opinion have encountered multiple challenges. Price has categorized these challenges into five types within this domain.

Firstly, dating back to the era of Plato and Aristotle, public opinion, both in its essence and actuality, has been subject to critical scrutiny. These philosophers harbored profound doubts regarding the capacity and expertise inherent in public opinion, particularly within the democratic framework, citing a deficiency in expert elements. Lippmann's seminal work, 'Public Opinion' (1922), similarly manifests a lack of confidence in the legislative and administrative capabilities of public opinion. Bryce contends that "public questions come in the third or fourth rank among the interests of life" (Bryce 1888, p. 8). Lippmann further posits that ordinary citizens lack adequate and accurate knowledge about public affairs, characterizing the political world as "out of reach, out of mind, out of sight" (Lippmann 1922, p. 29). The trust placed in public information agencies contributing to the formation of public opinion is vigorously contested by Bryce, Lippmann, and scholars following similar lines, underscoring the perceived lack of competency in public opinion.

The contemporary situation in India and the process of shaping public opinion, significantly reliant on media and social media, warrant discussion to comprehend the objectivity, accuracy, expertise, and competency of public opinion. In the current landscape where media agencies are predominantly influenced by corporate entities or subject to the control of ruling individuals or political parties, questions arise about the accuracy and impartiality of information, thereby influencing public opinion. The prevalence of fake news, paid news, and the dissemination of highly ideological and interest-driven information raises doubts about the competency of public opinion. Despite

these inaccuracies, the study of public opinion maintains its heightened relevance in exploring the veracity of public sentiment, irrespective of its ethical or moral standing. Consequently, the original intent behind the formation or examination of public opinion, aiming to represent the genuine needs of the people and provide legitimacy to the government, has evolved beyond the ethical and moral confines of public opinion, transitioning into the realm of understanding and shaping the existing public opinion among the masses.

Secondly, the examination of 'Public Opinion' by Lippmann indeed underscores the public's inadequacy in forming accurate opinions. However, scholars such as John Dewey, Lasswell, and Schattschneider contribute an additional dimension to the study, addressing the challenges within public opinion. Dewey posits that the primary issue lies not predominantly in the public's incompetence but rather in the insufficient methodology of public opinion communication and formation. Advocating for the rational and judgmental faculty of the public, Dewey emphasizes the role of education in enhancing public awareness, urging the improvement of resources in investigating public opinion. He asserts, "the essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is the problem of the public" (Dewey 1927, p. 208). Similarly, Lasswell, in "Democracy through Public Opinion," explores alternative approaches for improved results in public opinion and the sustenance of democratic institutions. On a different note, Schattschneider identifies substantial potential in the reasoning abilities of the public, contending that modern individuals possess the capacity to navigate governmental affairs. He argues that people, with increased involvement in day-to-day government affairs, can make informed choices and reflections (Schattschneider 1957). Therefore, the necessity for a competitive political system arises, wherein the public can form opinions more effectively with clear alternative options.

Examining the scenario of Indian public opinion, these issues gain significant relevance. As the largest democracy globally, with a substantial constitution, Indian democracy has endured for over 70 years. The survival of Indian democracy can be attributed to the proper reformation of public awareness and opinion, notwithstanding various ideological rumors. This endurance stems from the simultaneous existence of critical public judgment and ideological ignorance or adherence. While individuals vote based on caste and religious considerations, they also evaluate the performance of the incumbent party, resulting in strong anti-incumbency practices in Indian electoral behavior. Furthermore, mass ignorance toward certain significant issues is counteracted by mass intelligence and preferences on matters of importance. The juxtaposition of Plato's ideas and Schattschneider's relevance in Indian politics emphasizes the intricate dynamics shaping public opinion in the Indian context.

Thirdly, this perspective is rooted in the notion that there can never be an absolute public opinion; rather, it will always represent the viewpoint of a specific group, namely the majority. Within this context, two dangers associated with public opinion emerge: the dominance of the majority and the potential for the minority to become the dominator. Plato contends that public opinion is perilous as it lacks the voice of the expert. Furthermore, if the public opinion of the majority prevails, it does so at the expense of minority viewpoints. This nuanced discussion has been expounded upon by Tocqueville in the context of democracy in America (Tocqueville 1956 [1835]). Consequently, the peril of majoritarianism manifests in two ways—firstly, the absence of expert opinion, and secondly, the marginalization of minority perspectives.

Another peril within public opinion is articulated by scholars addressing the concept of power elites. Proponents such as Robert Dahl and Michael assert that democracy or power invariably resides in the hands of a select group of influential individuals, i.e., the political elite. The transfer of power cyclically revolves among these elites, and even the formation of public opinion merely reflects the reiteration of the viewpoints of these powerful political elites. An additional illustrative example elucidating the tyranny of the majority in the Indian context is discernible in the realm of language policies. The sway held by linguistic majorities, often coupled with strategic political machinations, recurrently results in the marginalization of linguistic minorities, underscoring the hazards associated with majoritarianism within the complex fabric of a diverse and pluralistic society.

Take, for instance, the state of Maharashtra, where Marathi predominates as the majority language. The Marathi-speaking populace, backed by robust political backing, has, on occasions, pursued policies emphasizing the preeminence of Marathi across various spheres, ranging from educational initiatives to administrative functions. This linguistic majoritarian inclination has, at times, led to the neglect or sidelining of linguistic minorities, such as the Gujarati-speaking community in specific pockets of the state.

In this scenario, political entities aligned with the linguistic majority frequently orchestrate language policies geared toward the advancement and imposition of the majority language. The discourse encompassing language metamorphoses into a strategic instrument through which the linguistic majority reinforces its ascendancy, consigning linguistic minorities to the fringes. This dynamic can culminate in a scenario where the linguistic rights and cultural expressions of minority groups find themselves eclipsed or stifled to accommodate the linguistic predilections of the majority. Similar instances can be observed in other states, like Tamil Nadu or West Bengal. Herein, it's very challenging to come an objective Judgment on public opinion.

Fourthly, the susceptibility of the public to emotional persuasion is a noteworthy aspect. Kornhauser observes that appeals to emotions constitute an integral component of political dynamics (Price 1992, p. 20). Lippmann underscores this by stating, "the formation of a singular general will out of a multitude of disparate wishes is not a Hegelian mystery, as imagined by many political philosophers, but an art well-known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols, which evoke emotions after they have been detached from their ideas" (Lippmann 1925, p. 47). The ascendancy and triumph of fascist parties in Europe serve as a pertinent exemplification of the aforementioned argument.

In the Indian context, the success of the BJP in the general election of 2014, propelled by persuasive forces such as 'religion and development,' also translates into victories for the BJP in various state assembly elections until 2018. However, predicting the efficacy of similar persuasive strategies by the party in subsequent elections remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the prevailing reality in Indian society and politics underscores the enduring influence of religion and caste as potent persuasive forces that shape or reshape public opinion among the masses.

Finally, the domination of the elite stands out as a pivotal factor in generating and regenerating public opinion. Ginsberg astutely observes that public opinion in modern democracies functions as the 'domestication of mass belief' (Ginsberg 1986). Scholars such as Mills, Habermas, and Chomsky, in addition to Dahl and Michael, have extensively expounded on the role of elites in influencing public opinion. Mills posits that in the American context, the population has been transformed into a market that consumes public opinion rather than being a public that produces ideas and opinions (Habermas 1962). This transformation of the public into a market for consuming public opinion has become a routine phenomenon in India as well. The media has evolved into an agent for the dissemination of rumors and the production of information, with the public consuming these elements to form their opinions.

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper presents a comprehensive understanding the concept of public opinion within the ambit of social science research. The historical journey, tracing its roots from influential philosophers like Rousseau and Locke to its evolution in the 18th century and subsequent complexities in terms of conceptualization, meaning and development has been explore in detail in the first part of the paper. To elaborate the terms 'public and 'opinion' are explained by defining their variants and types historically. The types of public consists of General Public, Voting Public, Attentive Public, Active Public, and Issue Public; whereas 'opinion is meticulously differentiated from the term attitude and other related terms which are mostly used in the disciplines of psychology and philosophy.

The second part of the paper demonstrates the process of opinion formation and shows how it involves the concepts such as schemata, values, and group identification. These foundational elements serve as theoretical explanations for the overt expressions of public sentiment, highlighting the dynamic nature of opinion formation in response to changing circumstances.

The third part significantly focuses on the historical exploration of the term "public opinion" from its early usage in the 18th century to its contemporary relevance establishes connections with significant events, literary developments, and philosophical ideas. In the 20th century, the research domain was expanded to cover the scope of inquiry into sociological and psychological aspects of public opinion, leading to the establishment of academic sub-disciplines. The role of organizations like the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) in shaping the discipline and the challenges in procuring objectivity in public opinion survey research in the contemporary democratic settings remains the major concern of this paper.

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