



Public Opinion & Political Engagement

Lecture by Clemens Jarnach

Pembroke College, University of Oxford, 4th Aug 2023

Lecture

▼ Public Opinion

- Public opinion is how society collectively views political and current affairs, policy issues and political leaders.
- Public opinion has a significant but somewhat unpredictable impact on politicians, politics and policy.
- Public opinion matters! - at least for democratic systems

▼ What is Behavioural Science?

An interdisciplinary field that studies and analyses human behaviour through the lenses of psychology, economics, sociology and other social sciences. It seeks to understand how individuals make decisions, how they interact with each other and their environment, and how their behaviour can be influenced or changed.

What do we have to consider?

- Rationality and its limitations

- Biases and shortcuts
- Norms
- Incentives
- Framing of choices
- Fatigue and decision making
- Environment
- ...

▼ Action and Behaviour

Sociology is ‘the interpretive understanding of social action, and thereby ... causal explanation of its course and consequences.’
 ‘Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others’

– Max Weber, 1920

“two or more individuals are physically in one another’s presence”

– Goffman, 1983

Interpersonal relations or interactions cannot be solely described by concentrating on one participant of a dyadic or polyadic interaction/relationship. The action of one individual (with another) must be studied within the social context and the relation to and interaction with others.

▼ Symbolic interactionism

The term “symbolic interactionism” was coined by Herbert **Blumer** in 1937, however, our understanding of this framework is majorly influenced by the writing of George Herbert **Mead** (Scott, 2014). This theory is based on the notion that **society is created and shaped by symbols and symbolic interactions between individuals.**

“Interactionists are always concerned to study the ways in which people give meaning to their bodies, their feelings, their selves, their biographies, their

situations, and indeed to the wider social worlds in which their lives exist.”(Scott, 2014)

Symbolic interactionism, as the name suggests, emphasizes the role of *interaction*. “From this point of view, there is no such thing as a solitary individual: humans are always connected to ‘others’. The most basic unit of interactionist analysis is that of the self, which stresses the ways in which people can (indeed must) come to view themselves as objects, and assume the role of others through a process of role-taking. This idea is clarified in Charles Horton Cooley's notion of the looking-glass self and Mead's more general idea of ‘the self’.”(Scott, 2014)

▼ Rational Choice Theory

“Rational-choice theorists want to explain behavior on the bare assumption that **agents are rational**. This assumption includes the hypothesis that agents form **rational beliefs**, including beliefs about the **options available to them**. There is no need, therefore, to classify the determinants of behavior as either subjective (desires) or objective (opportunities). **Rational-choice theory is subjective through and through.**” (Elster, 2015)

"An action is rational, in this scheme, if it meets three optimality requirements: the action must be

1. optimal, given the beliefs;
2. the beliefs must be as well supported as possible, given the evidence;
3. and the evidence must result from an optimal investment in information gathering." (Elster, 2015)

‘Rational choice is the sociological theory with the greatest explanatory power.’ *Discuss*.

▼ Limits of Rational Choice Theory

Prof Herbert Simon, Nobel Prize winner, argues that decisions are hard because of factors such as imperfect information, uncertainty, and time constraints, which all affect and limit our rationality, and therefore our decision-making.

Led to the concept of **Bounded Rationality**, Simon (1957)[²] coined the term to explain that rationality has its limits and is limited by factors e.g. 1) difficulty of the problem, 2) cognitive capability, and 3) time available, among others.

▼ Political Polarisation

Political polarisation is the process by which the political opinions of a population become more and more divided along two opposing sides. This can happen on a variety of issues, but it is most commonly seen in two-party systems.

There are many different theories about what causes political polarization. Some of the most common explanations include:

- **The rise of partisan media:** The rise of cable news and social media has made it easier for people to consume news and information that confirms their existing beliefs. This can lead to people becoming more entrenched in their own views and less willing to listen to opposing viewpoints.
- **The decline of trust in institutions:** In recent years, there has been a decline in trust in institutions such as the media, government, and the judiciary. This has made people more likely to turn to partisan sources for information, which can further polarize their views.
- **The increasing salience of cultural issues:** Cultural issues such as abortion, gun control, and same-sex marriage have become increasingly salient in recent years. This has made it more difficult for people on opposite sides of these issues to find common ground.

Baldassari & Bearman (2007) developed a model of political polarization that suggests that it is driven by two factors:

- **The increasing salience of political issues:** As political issues become more salient, people become more likely to identify with a political party. This can lead to people becoming more polarized, as they become more entrenched in their own party's views.
- **The increasing homogeneity of social networks:** As people become more connected to others who share their political views, they are less likely to be exposed to opposing viewpoints. This can lead to people becoming more polarized, as they become less aware of the views of those who disagree with them.

Other common references on political polarization include:

- **Levendusky** examines the rise of political polarization in the United States. Levendusky argues that polarization is driven by the increasing sorting of people into ideologically homogeneous communities.

- **Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes (2012):** This article examines the effects of partisan media on political polarization. Iyengar et al. find that exposure to partisan media can lead people to become more polarized in their views.

▼ Social Capital

Coleman (1988) defined social capital as a set of resources embedded in social structures that enable actors to act together more effectively to achieve common goals

This definition highlights the two key aspects of social capital: it is a resource that is embedded in social structures, and it enables actors to act together more effectively. The resources that are embedded in social structures include networks of relationships, reciprocity, trust, and social norms. These resources can be used to achieve common goals by facilitating communication, coordination, and cooperation.

Social capital is the collective value of all the actual and potential resources embedded in social networks and institutionalized relationships.

It is a resource that inheres in the structure of social relations.

For **Burt** (2004), social capital is the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of their *position* in a network. Thus, it is a social network concept, as the *position* of an individual in a network may hold value in terms of social capital.

▼ Voting Behaviour

Consider two claims:

- C1) A rational and self-interested agent would vote in an election.
- C2) For a rational, self-interested voter to vote, the expected benefits of voting must exceed the costs of voting.

Downs' Paradox

"Much recent theorizing about the utility of voting concludes that voting is an irrational act in that it usually costs more to vote than one can expect to get in return" (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968)

$$R = BP - C + D$$

where

R is the reward, in utiles, that an individual voter receives from his act of voting

B is the difference in utility (voter's benefit) depending on the outcome.

P is the probability that the vote will be pivotal.

C is the cost of voting.

D is the utility gained from voting that is unrelated to the outcome.

The probability that a single person's vote will be pivotal in a large-scale election is exceedingly low. In the context of a national election in the United States, where millions of people typically vote, the chances of any individual vote determining the outcome of the election are virtually negligible.

Thus, since **P** is minuscule the prediction from this model without **D** is zero turnout (the paradox of voting).

If the **D** term does the main work in explaining turnout then socio-psychological variables are likely to be more relevant than institutional ones and the peculiarly 'rational choice' part of the model.

▼ What elements could be in **D**?

According to Riker and Ordeshook (1968):

- The satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting, which if the citizen is at all socialized into the Democratic tradition is positive when he votes and negative (from guilt) when he does not.
- the satisfaction from affirming allegiance to the political system
- the satisfaction from affirming a partisan preference
- the satisfaction of affirming one's efficacy in the political system

Discussion

- Do people have an opinion?
- Is there a collective opinion on political matters? and if so, how many?
- What if people don't know what they want? - either due to ignorance, lack of interest, or indecisiveness.

- Can people express their opinion?
- How do people express their opinion?
- Does / How does / Should - the government respond to public opinions?
- Why do people vote in elections?
- All social action is rational when viewed from the standpoint of the actor.
- Can apparently altruistic actions be reconciled with rational choice theory?

References & Recommended Readings

- Baldassarri, D., & Gelman, A. (2008). Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(2), 408–446. <https://doi.org/10.1086/590649>
- Berelson, B., Lazarsfeld, P., & McPhee, W. (1966). *Voting: A study of opinion formation in a presidential campaign* (1st Phoenix ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Blais, A. (2006). What affects voter turnout? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9(1), 111–125.
- Campbell, A. (1980). *The american voter* (Unabridged ed.). University of Chicago Press / University of Michigan. Survey Research Center.
- James S. Coleman, 1988, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', AJS 94.
- Dalton, R. J. (2022). Political inequality and the democratic process. In *The oxford handbook of political participation*. Oxford University Press.
- Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. Harper & Row.
- Festinger, L. (1962). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford university press.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Polity.
- Key, V. O. 1908-1963. (1961). *Public opinion and American democracy*. Knopf, 1961.
- Klapper, J. T. (1960). *The effects of mass communication*. Free Press.

- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480–498.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1948). Mass communication, popular taste, and organized social action. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*. New York: Harper.
- Lippmann, W. (1965). *Public opinion*. Free Press.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D., & Nielsen, R. (2017). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*.
- Office of Communications, Great Britain. (2022). *News Consumption in the UK: 2022*. Ofcom, Jigsaw Research.
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/___data/assets/pdf_file/0027/241947/News-Consumption-in-the-UK-2022-report.pdf
- Plato. (1982). *The republic* (P. Shorey, Ed.). Harvard University Press ; W. Heinemann.
- Riker, W. H., & Ordeshook, P. C. (1968). A theory of the calculus of voting. *The American Political Science Review*, 62(1), 25–42.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1950). *Capitalism, socialism, and democracy* (3rd ed.). George Allen & Unwin.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Republic.com 2.0* (2. print., and 1. paperback print). Princeton Univ. Press.
- Van Aelst, P., Strömbäck, J., Aalberg, T., Esser, F., de Vreese, C., Matthes, J., Hopmann, D., Salgado, S., Hubé, N., Stępińska, A., Papathanassopoulos, S., Berganza, R., Legnante, G., Reinemann, C., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2017). Political communication in a high-choice media environment: A challenge for democracy? *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 41(1), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551>
- Wittman, D. A. (1995). *The myth of democratic failure: Why political institutions are efficient*. University of Chicago Press.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge University Press.