

Public opinion and policy

Summary

- The formation and structure of public opinion is a complex process.
- Public opinion often reflects economic position and interests.
- Ways of testing public opinion include the use of sophisticated opinion polls and focus groups.
- While great store is placed on the use of polls on many social issues, little heed was taken of public opinion when implementing New Right economic policies.
- Many of those affected by economic restructuring became supporters of One Nation.

The shape of public policy, as previous chapters have tried to explain, is the outcome of the broad ebb and flow of ideas about the role of government. The ascendancy at any one time of ideas favouring either government intervention or free-market economics provides much of the intellectual climate for public policy. However, in democratic systems governments cannot develop policies without considering public opinion. Governments require support to enhance the legitimacy and, therefore, the success of their policies. In chapter 2 the role of consultation in the development of policy is examined. This chapter develops the interaction between government and the public from another dimension: the role played by the systematic gathering of

public opinion, either by government or by large media organisations, to which government pays considerable attention. This process differs from consultation in several fundamental ways. First, whereas consultation is designed to be a two-way information exchange, the gathering of public opinion presents to government a representative sample of public opinion. Second, consultation is designed to be an open and accountable process, whereas the gathering of data on public opinion from polls and surveys presents information to political elites without their having to justify the manner of its use or influence. Third, the systematic gathering of data on public opinion presents government with comprehensive information on public views which is typically composed of a range of socioeconomic variables, including age, gender, party affiliation, geographic location and income group. This information is of great strategic value to governments and political parties in the planning of their policy responses.

Thus, while governments have the ability to shape public opinion in favour of a set of particular policies, they are also able to tap into and respond to community views and tailor policies accordingly. Often there is an inherent tension between these two approaches. Should governments attempt to lead public opinion but risk losing popularity? Should they respond to community views but risk the charge of populism? There is no easy path between these two routes to governing. Overwhelmingly, governments feel the desire to stay in office which, naturally, leads them to seek public approval. However, the experience of public policy since the early 1980s shows some contradictory trends in the role of public opinion. On key economic policies governments have often ignored the views of the public, while on a range of social issues there is evidence of governments seeking out and responding to public opinion.

However, in general terms, whether governments are trying to lead or follow public opinion, the structure of mass opinion does set limits on the range of policies they can adopt. This can make it difficult for governments to act in a coherent and consistent fashion, as public opinion may vary widely across issues and change over time. The growing sophistication of measures to test public opinion, together with the breakdown of long-term party-political loyalties, are additional pressures on political parties to be more responsive to public opinion.

The structure of public opinion

The formation of public opinion is a complex process. Russett and Starr (1996) argue that people may support a policy for three main reasons: because doing so satisfies psychological needs; because on the basis of available information they perceive the policy as consistent with certain interests and beliefs; and because the segment of their social environment reaffirms support. As this argument suggests, there is no single public voice on any of the major issues facing government or, indeed, on the role of government itself. Rather, there are a series of voices that tend to reflect social class. However, the social structure of Australia has been fragmenting under the economic changes of the past decade. The impact of technology on jobs, the growth of unemployment, the downward pressure on middle-class salaries, and the growing disparities between the very rich and everybody else, has significantly frayed the traditional three-tiered class structure of Australia. Hence, public opinion is also fragmenting. Despite these complexities, dominant patterns of public opinion still exist, and these have a tendency to reflect socioeconomic position. The difficulty for government is to hold together enough of these disparate groups to implement its policies while staying in power.

The wealthy elite

A feature of Australian society throughout the 1980s and 90s has been the growth in wealth of the top echelon of society. This group consists of the mega-wealthy—those who make up the Rich 200 list, with fortunes in excess of \$42m—and a broader group, consisting of top management, the elite professionals, and the higher ranks of the banking, finance and service industries. As the biggest winners from the moves towards the free market agenda and minimal government, they are among its staunchest and most influential advocates. While it is important not to overstate the unified outlook of this group, there is, as McGregor (1997) comments, ‘enough common interest among members of the class to form a recognisable, interlocking class group in which social and kinship ties can be almost as important as financial ones’. This wealthy elite has its parallels in all English-speaking industrial countries where similar New Right policies have been pursued by governments. Christopher Lasch (1995) has characterised the outlook of this elite in the USA which bears some resemblance to Australia’s elites. While diverse in occupation, the elite are:

- removed from the lives and concerns of ordinary people;
- tied to a global network of work and leisure;
- isolated from the problems of industrial cities and declining public services, living in a few, select wealthy enclaves;
- opposed to paying for public services they no longer use;
- prepared to buy all their services—including health, education and individual security—from the private sector;
- indifferent to the obligations of citizenship, including the need for reciprocal obligation to the less well-off.

Similar developments are occurring in Australia. The workforce is increasingly made up of people living in separate worlds, completely foreign to one other, as groups of professionals, company executives and entrepreneurs reap record incomes. As one commentator on these developments recently wrote:

The geographic divisions of have and have-not neighbourhoods that have followed in the wake of income divisions have all helped to further the new isolationism that is becoming a feature of Australian life. How long will it be before Sydney and Melbourne see as commonplace the **'gated' residential places** so popular in places like Los Angeles?¹

The fragmenting middle class

Australia's reputation as the most middle-class nation in the world—where jobs and incomes for the majority were secure—has come under threat from forces of economic change. This has created a more complex structure for those 'in the middle'. One stratum, which is tertiary-educated and professional, is widely seen as radical or progressive on social issues, strong on the environment, and focused on **'quality of life' issues** rather than just economic issues.

Underneath this group is a core of lower-paid white-collar workers, described by McGregor as 'struggling away on worsening incomes, worsening conditions and worsening job chances'. These are the lower middle-class, earning \$25–30 000 and characterised by McGregor as having been dislocated by the new economic order of deregulation and globalisation. Many have been de-skilled, been made unemployed

'Gated' residential places: a community of wealthy people protected from the outside by high walls and extensive security.

'Quality of life' issues: policies that are seen to be part of the broader social and community life of individuals, as opposed to more narrowly focused economic issues.

or redundant, while others have been forced into re-training or casual work with a loss of award protection. They are angered by the 'cataclysmic loss of security and upward mobility which were thought to be the prerogative of their middle class identity'.²

Many in this group fear they are losing ground and feel anxious about future job security for themselves and their children. Sociologist Michael Pusey has recently studied the attitudes of 'middle Australia' and found that most believe that life is getting worse:

Two-thirds said that 'government is mostly, or entirely, run by a few big interests, rather than for the benefit of all', and three quarters felt 'big business has too much power'. There was also a generalised belief that the Middle Class was being 'hollowed out' by economic changes and by the surge of 'economic rationalism' over the past 15 years, and even those whose incomes had risen steeply felt pessimistic about the future of middle Australia.³

Despite this feeling of pessimism about the future, 'middle Australia' has a strong streak of self-reliance, as articulated by Don Watson, speech-writer to Paul Keating when he was Prime Minister:

As much as they might believe in the elimination of poverty, the desirability of social equality and the responsibility of governments to look after the weak and the dispossessed, Australians also believe that effort should be rewarded above sloth, and that those who take responsibility for their own lives and those of their children should receive encouragement.⁴

Watson was alluding to one of the pervasive features of lower-middle (and working-class) opinion which emerged in the mid-1990s: the politics of resentment. People struggling on low wages, and who have seen the quality of public service decline, resent the least privileged sections of the community whom they perceive as still able to access government benefits. This group includes welfare recipients, immigrants and Aborigines.

The traditional working class

A decade and more of economic restructuring has brought great hardships to many in this group. Many working-class men, especially, have traditional associations with the union movement, and are usually characterised as conservative on social issues, supporters of a stable and structured economic framework, government intervention, industry protection and jobs-first policies.

However, this group's political attitudes are no longer quite so

clearcut. They have much in common with elements of the lower middle class in terms of economic pressures and hardships. This was recognised by Liberal Party strategists in the lead-up to the 1996 federal election, and the term 'battlers' was coined to conceptualise the interlinking of the two social groups and their shared economic and social concerns. Together, they formed a decisive group at the 1996 federal election, underpinning the size of the Coalition victory. Attempts by both major parties to represent this group provide one of the ongoing dynamics of federal politics.

Below the traditional working class is a group that survives on social security payments. Members of this group have been characterised by some sociologists as an 'underclass'. This is a controversial term devised originally in the USA to describe (and often deride) the behaviour and outlook of the mostly young, black and Hispanic unemployed of the country's large cities. Significant numbers of this group resort to crime and drug use/dealing while appearing to remain indifferent to work and mainstream American values. According to some, these are signs of a lack of moral values prevalent among this group. However, Australia's system of compulsory voting gives this group a voice in national affairs. In voluntary voting systems, such as in the USA, considerable numbers of the underclass do not vote because they perceive little value in doing so.

The term 'underclass' has also gained currency in Australia, to describe long-term welfare recipients whose material lifestyle is therefore below that of the traditional working class. Typically, these are people who have left school early and experienced periods of unemployment. As McGregor (1997) writes: 'There are now class ghettos in Australia which are not so different from their American counterparts; not unexpectedly, equivalent patterns of social distress and violence have begun to emerge'. The numbers of such people have grown steadily since the early 1980s, but little is known about the political attitudes of members of this group.

The influence of polled public opinion

It is not always easy to demonstrate the effect public opinion has on the outcome of particular policies, because it is usually not in the interests of political leaders to be seen to be pandering to public opinion. However, several points can be made.

Public opinion is obviously more likely to be influential when it

has reached a critical mass—that is, when it somehow is seen to represent majority opinion. There are a number of examples of mass opinion influencing policy. In 1985, for example, the Hawke government commissioned ANOP to conduct an opinion poll of community attitudes to Aboriginal land rights. In its analysis of the results to the government, ANOP found that public opinion was divided into three main camps: one-quarter strongly opposed to land rights; one-quarter firmly supportive; with the remaining half predisposed to opposing the granting of land rights due to ignorance, misinformation and ‘soft’ racism.⁵ Thus, the poll supposedly found that most people opposed, or potentially opposed, land rights. The results are thought to have been critical to the decision by the Hawke government to drop its stated policy to grant national land rights.

Polled public opinion often carries influence if it affects the support of a core block of supporters of the party in power. The Howard government’s difficulties with nursing homes policy during 1997 is a prime example of this impact. The original policy had potentially profound implications for the frail aged. It meant some might be forced to sell their homes to pay for a ‘bond’ to enter a nursing home. It was designed by the Howard government to be a **user-pays approach** to help fund nursing homes. In addition to causing considerable anxiety among the aged, the policy was particularly unpopular with voters in the 50 and over group, the majority of whom are core Liberal supporters. This fact was confirmed by newspaper opinion polls, which were thought to be influential in forcing the government into making a series of politically damaging backdowns on key aspects of the policy’s details in an attempt to make it more palatable.

In a similar way, polled public opinion can bolster a government’s preferred course of action if key members of its own constituency are shown to be on side. This is especially the case on those issues where governments are compelled by the pressure of circumstances to come up with a policy response to matters not of its own making. There are several examples of this occurring over recent times. Coalition voters, for example, were found to be strongly in support of Prime Minister John Howard’s refusal to give approval to the ACT heroin trial and to his refusal to offer a national apology for the stolen generations of Aboriginal children.

However, it is not always the case that supporters of a political

User-pays approach: a form of delivery of government services in which people pay the full costs of the service rather than these being made cheaper or free through government subsidy.

party hold similar views on every issue. At times supporters are deeply divided. Forestry, and the calls to protect old-growth forests from logging and woodchipping, was one such issue during the ALP's (1983–96) term in office. Timber workers opposed moves to further protect forests, while the educated urban professionals were often in the vanguard of such calls. In such instances government policy becomes an exercise in compromise, through a process of protracted negotiation. Policy can also get bogged down while governments sort through competing political demands.

Public opinion is volatile and capable of substantial shifts, especially on controversial issues. The proposal for the part-privatisation of Telstra is a telling case in point. When John Howard devised this policy in the lead-up to the 1996 election, the AGB-McNair poll found only 41 per cent favouring the sell-off while 51 per cent were against. By mid-1996, following a thorough airing of the issue during the election campaign, 51 per cent were in favour and 42 per cent against.

On critical issues, political leaders will seek to shape public opinion. Some of the more dramatic illustrations of these attempts include Paul Keating's 1986 declaration of Australia as 'a banana republic' in an effort to shock the nation into the need for economic reform. More recently, John Howard has used a variety of devices to deal with the controversial Aboriginal lands rights claim to pastoral leases. Initially he used the imagery of a pendulum that had gone too far in the direction of Aboriginal rights, and later he deployed a map of Australia as a television prop to show the 78 per cent of the continent which, he claimed, could be subject to title if corrective measures were not taken. Political interventions of this sort may well have an impact. However, the low standing in which most of the public holds politicians means they are rarely looked on as a source of reliable information.

The complexities of public opinion

It should not be overlooked that public opinion on complex issues is often very difficult to accurately assess. Krueger (1988) argues that some opinions may be developed quickly and held with absolute certainty, while others are malleable and dynamic. Public opinion researchers, for example, had very differing understandings of the public's response to the federal government's proposed 10-point Wik

legislation, following an extensive public debate during 1997. Social researcher Hugh McKay, whose specialty is small, **focus-group research**, noted a recent trend developing in middle-class suburban Australia that was more positive towards Aboriginal justice issues. McKay explained this trend:

Five years ago it was ‘we have no idea what Aborigines want so we have no idea what we are supposed to do about it, so please don’t mention it’. Now people are beginning to understand what the issues are about and what Aborigines want. It’s not even to do with particular compassion for Aboriginal people. It’s more ‘isn’t it pathetic that we can’t sort this out?’.⁶

However, a different conclusion was reached by ANOP pollster Rod Cameron, who had been conducting commissioned private polling on the issue:

Those who are neutral or liberal minded have been mobilised on this issue. The small ‘l’ liberal members of society found in [wealthy suburbs] feel very passionately. But I don’t think their views extend beyond the leafy suburbs. In terms of the raw numbers in society, they are not the majority and our research does not indicate a great deal of change.⁷

The interesting point about this exchange is the different methods involved in trying to determine the nature of public opinion. Cameron was relying on the standard opinion poll, which attempts to take a representative sample of public opinion across socioeconomic areas from which generalisations can be made. McKay, on the other hand, gauges public opinion by talking to smaller groups of people in situations where it is possible to discuss their opinions in greater depth. However, on very complex, technical issues such as land rights on pastoral leases it is not surprising that public opinion can be difficult to determine. It is an issue that does not directly affect the vast majority of Australians, and many people probably have limited interest in it and equally limited information on which to base a confident opinion.

Focus-group research: the eliciting of information from small groups of people in order to collect a wider range of data than is possible through opinion polls. Focus groups are especially valuable for surveying underlying emotional responses to issues.