Political Actors' Perceptions of Public Opinion: Assessing the Impact of Opinion on Decision Making

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1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding public opinion and its relationship with public policy has become a central part of discussions around democracy in twenty-first century North America. It seems that public opinion, whether it is understood as the results of polls and focus groups, letters to the editor, letters to elected officials, interest group communications, or media communication (such as talk radio shows and columnists), has become part of the public policy making process in various ways. Members of the mass public, as well as political actors (interest group representatives, bureaucrats, elected officials, and others), are being bombarded with discussions of public opinion. It has become difficult to open a newspaper or watch television news without hearing about the results of the latest poll (Herbst, 2001; Kennamer, 1994; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Technological innovations have increased our ability to measure opinion, and the public opinion industry has become increasingly visible.

In trying to understand the links between public policy and public opinion, most researchers rely on democratic responsiveness (or responsiveness) theories that purport that strong public opinion in one direction or another will (and should) be reflected in the policies and procedures of a representative government. When public opinion shifts, or when it strongly supports or opposes particular policies, public policy will (also) shift.[1] Theories are often tested by quantitatively analysing relationships between public opinion and public policies.

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[1] Although there is a clearly a normative aspect to democratic responsiveness theories, for the purposes of this paper, focus will be primarily on any observed relationships or non-relationships between public policy and opinion.

However, although we can draw some conclusions about the links between public opinion and public policy based on this kind of research, we have a limited understanding of how political actors involved in particular policy areas view, are affected by, and utilize public opinion. How do those involved in the policy making process understand public opinion? What factors affect whether or not, when, and how public opinion becomes part of the policy making process?

This paper establishes a framework for attempting to understand political actors' perceptions of public opinion, possible actions actors take in relation to public opinion, and the relationship between public opinion and public policy decisions. By applying this framework to particular case studies of political actors in two provinces in two policy areas, it is hoped that it will be become possible to gain a clearer understanding of the possible factors at work in the relationship between public opinion and public policy.

2. FACTORS INFLUENCING HOW POLITICAL ACTORS UNDERSTAND AND USE PUBLIC OPINION

It seems certain that how political actors understand public opinion (what forms it takes, how it is measured, and its potential usefulness) will influence whether or not they take it into consideration at all when making decisions about particular policies (Herbst, 1998). There are a number of elements explored in the academic literature that may impact political actors' understanding and utilization of public opinion. Understanding who (or which public) is expressing the opinion(s), whether or not the opinion can be considered valid, and what forms public opinion might take are all important considerations for understanding actors' perceptions of public opinion. Understanding the context surrounding the political actor is key to understanding how public opinion is

important. Both the electoral cycle and the actors' political and ideological goals are important concerns. Assessing the salience of particular policy issues for the public and the type of policy under discussion are both important for constructing a understanding of the factors that may influence political actors' views of public opinion and the way they may make use of it.

Understanding the "Public"

The public is, by its very nature, heterogeneous. Although the term "public opinion" is often used to imply a unanimous viewpoint, members of the public clearly hold very different views on any one issue. The "public", as a subject of research, is not always the same creature. There a variety of different publics that one could discuss:

> …there is a "voting public" (i.e., a body of actual voters), an "attentive public" (characterized by the interest in politics and at least occasional participation in debates on political issues), an "active public" (representing the elite of the "attentive public"), and "sectoral" or "special publics", which merely by their size (the number of members) differ greatly from each other (Splichal, 1999: 16).

Although there may be overlaps between the multiple publics, certain publics such as the active publics (those who may become directly involved in politics, and/or who may vote) are likely to be of more interest to political actors than those publics which could be considered passive. Special publics (such as interest groups or social movements) limit access to the "greater" or "mass" public, which raises some concerns about whether special publics can be considered public at all. Instead, the "special" publics may be discussed as separate from, but part of, the "mass" public that we tend to think of as being involved in public opinion measurement.

In spite of this consideration, opinion research such as polling results in the amalgamation of the opinions of many individuals into a limited category of responses, virtually eliminating individual voices of dissent. In addition, each issue is usually of interest to only particular segments of the public, but polling provides results that include individuals who are really not interested in an issue (passive citizens) as well as those who would be classified as active citizens and would work to ensure that the issue was addressed by government (Emery, 1994).

It may be assumed that because public opinion polling, for example, aggregates both "active" and "passive" citizens' opinions, it is not always a useful tool as political actors do not always know what percentage of citizens are more likely to act on their opinions (by writing letters to elected officials, making public statements, taking part in a demonstration, etc), versus staying passive.[2] However, it has been argued that opinions coming from these passive publics are still important, because they do reflect some elements of public sentiment that must be considered by political actors.

Understanding "Opinion"

There is as much discussion in the literature around what constitutes "opinion" as there is on how we constitute the public holding the opinion. One of the most fundamental discussions around opinion relates to the measurement of opinion: whether what is being measured is actually opinion and not something else. It is not uncommon to refer to values, beliefs, and attitudes when talking about opinion. However, some such

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[2] This is an argument in support of looking at a variety of different kinds of measures of public opinion, as well as looking further into what decision makers rely on to assess the public mood. It is also the impetus behind polls attempting to identify "opinion leaders" in the public, in order to assess which respondents are likely to take some action or have an influential force in the public with regard to particular policy areas.

as Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979) have dismissed the measurement of opinion entirely, stating that it simply could not exist as "…citizens [are] rarely interested or educated enough to articulate informed opinions" (in Herbst, 1993: 46).

Opinions may change over time (and from survey to survey), and may not always be ideologically consistent. The literature demonstrates that opinions are changeable. They may not be consistent from survey to survey over time. Opinions may also change based on how questions are asked or "framed", or what is happening in the world.[3]

Others have noted that individuals may hold opinions that are contingent, and rely upon the context in which they are given. As Irwin Deutscher (1973) notes, "…the opinion we express in one public is not necessarily the same as that we express in a different public" (219). Individuals may express opinions in different publics that seem irreconcilable to researchers, but that make sense to the individuals. In their book on ambiguity in American public opinion entitled *Reading Mixed Signals*, Cantril and Davis Cantril (1999) propose that there is a long history of survey respondents sending mixed messages about what they want to see government doing. On one hand, they may express general views about what government should undertake. On the other hand, they may provide information about specific programs or activities that seems to contradict their general views. Cantril and Davis Cantril conclude that:

> …we also know that the ways people work things through in their minds can vary
> from subject to subject, can be influenced by the extent to which values may be in
> conflict, and can be affected by assumptions that have been built up through past
> experience (1999: 10).

One of the major concerns around the measure (and definition) of opinion revolves around the forthrightness of the interviewed citizen, and whether or not s/he may

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[3] The literature on "framing" shows that people's responses to an issue or problem often depends on how it is portrayed. See Kuklinski, 2001 and Druckman, 2001 for further discussion.

"…choose to abstain from specific questions rather than give opinions which might paint them in an unfavourable light" (Berinsky, 1999: 1210).[4] If true opinions are not expressed, then the resulting aggregate "public opinion" will not be an accurate measure of public opinion.

Issues around Assessing "Public Opinion"

Herbst (1998) has argued that the meaning of public opinion is in fact contingent upon a series of factors: "…the social climate, technological millieu, and communication environment in any democratic state together determine the way we think about public opinion and the ways we try to measure it" (8). Thinking about how to understand public opinion has become conflated with technical questions about how to measure it. One of the most pressing issues in the current literature is the seeming reduction of "public opinion" to the results of public opinion polls.

In spite of concerns about the reduction of public opinion to the results of opinion polls, it could well be argued that public opinion has come to mean (at least in practice), the summing up of a series of disparate individual opinions and with its measurement by public opinion surveys (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). Converse (1987) notes that "what the firm establishment of a public opinion polling industry has done is to homogenize the definition [of public opinion] and to stabilize it for the foreseeable future" (S13). In spite of ongoing debate around what is actually being measured in public opinion polls, there is support for the continued use of scientifically conducted polls in the measurement of public opinion. There are questions, however, related to what kinds of public opinion

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[4] See also Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion - Our Second Skin*, 2nd Edition. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

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polls are considered the most important for political actors: those conducted by their own parties (where results may or may not be released) or those conducted for public release?

However, many continue to argue that other forms of public opinion still count to political actors. Focus groups are increasingly relied upon to provide in-depth understanding of public concerns. In addition, letters to the editor of newspapers, opinions expressed during talk radio programmes, coffee row discussions, and letters from constituents continue to be important to political actors. The question becomes which of these forms of expression are political actors aware of, and which carry the most weight when considering public policy issues.

Electoral Cycle

It is often said that political actors are more likely to be responsive (or to "pander") to public opinion in the build-up to an election than they would be between elections (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). Equally important as responding to public opinion is to be *seen* to be responding. If the public does not know who has made decisions based on public opinion, then there is no point in making decisions that reflect opinion. Political actors must be able to receive credit for decisions made in order for their responsiveness to be worthwhile (Sharp, 1999).

The use of public opinion by non-elected political actors may also be tied to the electoral cycle in some ways. Interest groups certainly pay attention to the electoral cycle, mobilizing and reporting on the opinions of the publics they represent during the build-up to an election, including the creation of party platforms.

Ideology/Political actors' own views of the issue

Political actors come to a policy community with certain perspectives. As members of political parties, they face particular constraints that come from the need for the party's united front. Party platforms as well as other party or elected members' communications are reflections of the opinion within the party around a particular issue. As members of interest groups, they are likely to face similar divisions of opinion within the group, which must be resolved before a group can act publicly.

All political actors have identified certain goals to achieve, and public opinion may be seen as either standing in the way of those goals or supporting the goals. In order to gain support for and achieve their goals, actors may use public opinion to identify symbols, words, and concepts that resonate most clearly with the public, or that target particular segments of the public. Framing issues, or priming public opinion, is a tool political actors may use to get public opinion on side with decisions already made. As Emery (1994) has noted, "governments and political parties use polls to assist them in defining and prioritizing their positions on various contentious issues" (8). However, in many cases, public opinion is less influential than politics for actors involved in decision making (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000).

Issue Salience

In certain cases, particular issues may resonate more with particular publics than with others. Differences in the relative importance of these publics may have an impact on political actors' inclusion of public opinion concerns when making policy decisions. Converse (1987) notes that "…*effective* opinion can upon occasions depart widely from

populist opinion" (*Emphasis added*, S21), and that this is part of a natural societal process.

However, it must also be noted that there must be a certain *degree* of consensus on an issue before one could expect any government reaction.[5] An issue must be seen as salient by governments in order for response to occur (Petry, 1999). If there is a large majority of opinion that supports a policy change, then that change is much more likely to occur than if there is limited consensus within the public. John Geer (1996 in Sharp, 1999: 246) argues that it is only when issues are not deemed to be salient with the public that decision makers have the ability to either ignore public opinion or to work to manipulate it.

Type of Policy/Policy Area

It has also been argued that the type of public policy will have an impact on the links between public opinion and public policy. The "contingent approach" is premised on the understanding of a variety of different contingencies. Contingencies could include the institutional venue within which the policy is developing (including at what level of government it is applicable) who is involved in the policy community, and who the constituents are deemed to be (Sharp, 1999:26). Another defining contingency could be whether or not a policy is designed to provide material benefits or symbolic outcomes. Finally, a policy could be defined as easy or difficult to understand by the public. Difficult issues, involving technical detail or expert knowledge, are more likely to invoke an "unknowledgeable" response from citizens and for policy makers to ignore opinion as

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[5] Generally, consensus is expected to be at least 60% in order for an issue to be considered salient.

a result.   These collected contingencies may impact political actors' choices to use and respond to public opinion while making decisions.

3. HOW POLITICAL ACTORS MAKE USE OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA: LINKS BETWEEN PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC POLICY DECISIONS

Concluding that there is a relationship between public opinion and public policy in itself excludes various models of policy making that would emphasize the importance of interest groups, political parties, or elites while leaving no visible role for broader public opinion to play. However, there are many theoretical approaches that examine the role of public opinion in the policy making process (even if that role is to be ignored by political actors), that can be placed on a continuum from the "…most cynical or least sanguine (from the viewpoint of classical democratic theory) to what others might view as the most optimistic" (Sharp, 1999: 3).   These approaches can also be understood as being part of a continuum, with public policy as *not responsive* to public opinion (non-responsiveness theories) on one end and public policy as *responsive* to public opinion (responsiveness theories) on the other.

Political Actors Are Not Responsive to Public Opinion

Theorists who attempt to explain why public policy may not change to reflect public opinion shifts propose a number of different reasons why political actors (and specifically policy makers) may not be responsive to the public.

First, the "non-attitudes" approach suggests that public opinion is irrelevant to public policy because "…public opinion, at least as evidenced in poll data, is not real or meaningful (i.e., there is nothing for policy to be responsive to" (Sharp, 1999: 3).

Opinions are inconsistent, incoherent, subject to manipulation, and unknowledgeable, so it is unnecessary – and indeed highly problematic – to base policy decisions on public opinion results (Mondak & Creel Davis, 2001; Sharp, 1999).

Second, if public opinion diverges from elite opinion, then the public will be unsuccessful in achieving its desired ends (Brooks, in Petry 1999). Brooks argues that this can be understood as a clear example of democratic frustration. Third, similarly to Brooks' point, others have argued that political actors may not respond to public opinion because they consider their course of action to be for the benefit of the "greater good" (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). As Emery (1994) states:

> …the appeal and popularity of polls would seem to lie in their apparent ability to quantify something that is not easily quantifiable. [However,] the use of polls by governments does not necessarily mean that they will refrain from pursuing unpopular policies and doing "what is right" (10).

Fourth, it has been argued that political actors may not always respond to public opinion in the ways in which the public may want or expect. It may be that decision makers choose to respond in a different way to public opinion – moving slightly toward public opinion but perhaps not as far as the public might want. Last, and related to the earlier discussion of the electoral cycle, Sharp (1999) argues that in fact public policy may remain out of alignment with public opinion because the public may not be aware of particular policies or policy shifts. She notes that:

> …the re-election decisions imperative motivates legislators and presidents to make policy decisions in accordance with popular preferences only if the content of those policy decisions will be evident to the mass public and only if responsibility for those policy choices can be clearly traced (20).

Symbolic Use of Public Opinion: Responding without Responding

As Lippmann noted, there are other elements of the definition of public opinion separate from its construction and measurement. "Public opinion", according to both Lippmann (1922) and later Herbst (1998), is also a "…symbol, a rhetorical being referred to by legislative professionals and journalists in their conversations with each other…" (2). Being seen to be consulting the "public" and paying attention to its "opinions" is an important part of symbolic democracy for political actors. Public opinion can be used symbolically to supply an aura of legitimacy to actions not taken (or taken) by government. When consistency between policy and public opinion results from political actors' mobilization of public opinion, rather than from their responsiveness, that legitimacy has been falsely created.[6]

Evidence also suggests that elected officials (in particular) can avoid the political repercussions of being non-responsive to public opinion by taking symbolic actions (Cohen, 1997). The process of consulting the public through opinion measurement and the use of this opinion in the early stages of policy making (such as in the agenda-setting stage) both contain symbolic elements which can offset the ramifications of not responding to opinion in other stages of the policy process. Releasing public opinion research results that support actions taken by policy makers is another symbolic use of public opinion that does not require actors to actually respond to opinion.

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[6] See also Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's discussion of the manifest and latent functions of public opinion in *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion - Our Second Skin*, 2nd Edition. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Responding to Public Opinion By Manipulating Public Opinion

The "manipulated opinion" interpretation of the opinion – policy nexus argues

that if there is a correlation between public opinion and public policy, it is because

opinion has been manipulated to bring it into line with existing or proposed policy rather

than resulting from opinion influencing the direction of policy. When public opinion is

manipulated by political elites, the correlation between policy and opinion is not evidence

of policy responsiveness (Druckman, 2001).

> Benjamin Ginsburg argues that
>
> …modern governments have become [so] sophisticated in the use of public
> relations techniques, that public opinion has been tamed and channelled through
> the institutionalization of opinion polls and that governments therefore can
> "manage, manipulate, and use public sentiments" (in Sharp, 1999: 12).

Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) note, "Politicians track public opinion not to make policy but

rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the

policies they and their supporters favour" (xiii). This approach is premised on the

understanding that policy makers can access and use the media for this purpose, an

understanding that is borne out in the literature (see Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000, Iyengar &

Reeves, 1997). Public opinion is an entity to be massaged, managed, and manipulated to

support decisions made by political actors generally, and by elected politicians in

particular.

Political Actors Are Responsive to Public Opinion

The "responsiveness" approaches posit that public opinion does in fact have a real

impact on the direction and content of public policy.   Based on the pluralist conception

of the formation of mass opinion and the distribution of political power, democratic

responsiveness theories posit that public opinion "…is expected to be an autonomous force capable of shaping policy agendas and determining the actions of receptive policymakers" (Petry, 1999: 540). As well as shaping policy agendas, public opinion can impact policy makers' actions by defining acceptable and unacceptable policy choices, by providing support for greater spending in particular areas, and by shaping policy outcomes.

Responding to Public Opinion By Educating the Public

When considering this approach, however, it is important to distinguish between what Page and Shapiro (1992) deem to be the *education* of the public and the *manipulation* of the public. Manipulation, as previously discussed, involves providing fallacious or misleading information designed to result in the public making wrong decisions about policy options or government decisions (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992). However, it is important to note that there is a difference between manipulation, resulting in the wrong decisions, and education, (presumably) resulting in the correct decisions.

The process of educating the public, during which both public opinion and public policy shift as a result of ideas discussed at the elite level, is yet another model of the opinion-policy relationship. As Sharp notes,

> …the politics of ideas that is fought out at the elite level may gradually seep out, first to highly attentive publics and ultimately to the public more generally. Indeed, the very politicization of the policy learning process may help to ensure that there is a transmission belt to the broader public, with transformative consequences for erstwhile non-attitudes (32).

This approach proposes that the mass public starts out in a non-attitudes phase,

but then responds to education from elites. Once the public is educated about a particular

policy, public opinion shifts and policy follows. Sharp also notes that "…inconsistencies

between opinion and policy can be transformed into consistency if political elites

appropriately educate the mass public" (18).

Shaping policy agendas

It has been suggested that strong consensus in public opinion should be enough, in

a democratic state, to ensure a shift in policy toward something more in line with opinion

(Petry, 1999). Some have argued that one of the most important functions of public

opinion is to ensure that a particular policy issue becomes part of the policy agenda.

Therefore, shifts in public opinion could be seen as a call for government to do something

about a particular issue or situation.

Soroka emphasizes the links between the media, the government, and public

opinion in understanding how opinion can result in particular issues becoming part of the

policy agenda (2002). He notes that issue salience is a key component of understanding

how policy agendas are shaped, and that understanding to whom the issue is salient will

help predict whether or not it becomes part of the policy agenda. Splichal (1999)

concurs, arguing that consensus in public opinion can actually be a mechanism of societal

change, starting with its agenda-shaping possibilities.

Shaping policy constraints

Public opinion may provide parameters for policy discussions, options, and

decisions. It is important to note that public policy may be understood to be responsive

to public opinion even though the resulting policy may not be exactly what the public

wants. Sharp (1999) points out that policy responsiveness means that public policy is

consistent with public opinion,

> …although that consistency might mean that policy remains within a broad zone
> of indifference rather than an exact correspondence between public opinion and
> public policy. In this sense, public opinion serves as a key constraint on
> government action, rather than a causal agent for governing outcomes (21).

It is possible that consulting public opinion may demonstrate that certain policy options

would not be acceptable to the public, thus placing constraints on what policy makers are

able to do.

Another approach to understanding political actors' responsiveness to public

opinion is based on the premise that policy change is path dependent. Decisions made at

one point will ultimately restrict decision making in the future. Thus, early policy

decisions may be made based at least in part on public opinion, but then become locked

in to a particular path, and stray further and further away from public opinion as time

goes on (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Based on Anthony Downs' (1972) ideas of issue attention cycles, Sharp (1999)

argues that:

> …we might expect cycles of policy development that begin with substantial
> responsiveness to public opinion (during the phrase of frenzied popular concern
> with a problem), only to be replaced by a sustained period of discrepancy between
> public opinion and policy as the institutional sub-system responsible for policy
> implementation makes key decisions that move policy away from the initial
> consensus (71)

Downsian cycles may not be permanent, and public policy may again (at some point in

the future) break away from its path and respond to changes in public opinion.

Shaping policy outcomes

Some have argued that the mass public can be understood as acting as a thermostat for the level of policy involvement undertaken, rather than as a direct influence on particular policies per se (Wlezien, 1995; Wlezien & Soroka, 2003). If the public prefers a higher (or lower) level of spending in a particular area, then there is support for a corresponding change in policy. If the public favours greater spending than is currently allocated, we would expect to see a corresponding increase in government spending within the next budget cycle. When the policy changes in accordance to the wishes of the public, there is a corresponding shift in public opinion when the public's attitudes adjust to the revised policy. Converse (1987) argues that the consultation process, during which public opinion is assessed by decision makers, is a

> …delicate process of mutual adjustment and accommodation between the revealed opinion of constituents and one's own convictions. The results of this accommodation are rarely seen in responses that are dramatically out of character for the representative; but it is hard to deny that a good deal of influence, a great deal of it subtle, some less so, is taking place (S22).

4. THE STUDY

Understanding the factors affecting how political actors utilize public opinion provides a framework for a study designed to further assess the opinion-policy nexus. To date, much of the research on the opinion-policy relationship in Canada has been quantitative in nature and centred on the national level of government. These studies focus on calculating correlations between the results of national public opinion polls, such as those done by Gallup, Pollara, and Environics and trends in national public policy (Brooks, 1985; Petry, 1999; Wlezian & Soroka, 2003). Little attention has been paid to looking at how the relationships between public opinion and policy work in the

provinces, and whether or not this is consistent with responsiveness or non-responsiveness theories.

While the national-level quantitative work has been an extremely useful first step in understanding possible relationships between public opinion and public policy, it has not yet been possible to gain a clear understanding of how political actors themselves understand and make use of public opinion. Part of the uniqueness of this proposed study results from its focus on the relationships between public opinion and public policy in two Canadian provinces – Saskatchewan and Ontario – between 1990 and 2000. In addition, by examining how political actors understand and use public opinion, it will be possible to gain a fuller understanding of the relationships between public opinion and public policy.

The Provincial Policy Cases

Saskatchewan and Ontario are chosen to provide illustrative cases in part because of their striking differences. Saskatchewan – with a population of less than a million people – is a "have-not" province and Ontario – population slightly over twelve million – is a "have" province. Each has a unique relationship with the federal government. Each elected two different parties into government over three elections in the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium the two differed in partisan terms, with Ontario having a Conservative government and Saskatchewan a New Democratic government.   These differences would lead one to expect that political actors would respond differently to public opinion in each province. By looking at two issues that are primarily provincially controlled – university tuition fees and student loan programmes – it is hoped that it will

be possible to assess how the policy-opinion nexus might work in these different situations.

Post-secondary education in the twenty-first century has become accepted by most Canadians as a necessity for active participation in the economy. We often hear about how we live in a knowledge economy and how important it is for Canada as a country to be able to compete in a global market. As the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) noted in 1999,

> …the importance of postsecondary education in Canadian society has never been greater. Knowledge, information, and education are critical, and growing numbers of people of all ages are pursuing postsecondary education and training (1).

During the 1990s, both Saskatchewan and Ontario's policies around student loans and tuition fees seemed to diverge from what the public wanted to see in such policies, as measured by publicly-available polling data (Gallup Omnibus Poll, Pollara Ontario Perspective, Pollara National Perspectives, OISE/UofT's Public Attitudes Towards Education Surveys, Saskatchewan Government Polling, among others). A growing number of individuals expected their children to attend a post-secondary institution, yet they expressed concern about rising tuition fees and the increasing amount of personal debt carried by students (Bouchard & Zhao, 2000).

Discussion around tuition fees during the 1990s was rarely unaccompanied by discussion around student loan programmes. Changes were made to the funding options within the programmes as well as to repayment provisions in both provinces between 1990 and 2000. However, in both provinces, the policy changes enacted did not seem to be in line with those favoured by public opinion. How is it that decision makers in both provinces seem to have not responded to public concerns during this time?

In order to fully assess how political actors understood, responded to, and utilized public opinion around these policy areas in these provinces, it is first necessary to analyze developments in the particular policy areas, actors involved in the processes, and public opinion data from the ten-year period. It is important to note that the increased reporting of the results of polls by the media as synonymous with public opinion may be problematic for gaining a fuller understanding of what public opinion may actually be. By failing to understand how (and what) opinion is being expressed through other venues (such as letters to the editor and constituent letters to elected officials), we fail to gain a clearer, more complete picture of both what public opinion is and what decision-makers may be responding to. It is hoped that by looking at a variety of forms of expressed public opinion rather than just polling results, it will be possible to create a more accurate picture of public opinion in order to inform this problem.[7]

Once a clear picture of policy decisions, public opinion, and the relevant political actors has been created, it will be possible to assess how political actors define public opinion, how they assess its impact in policy making generally, and how they might explain the seeming lack of government response to public demands for lower tuition fees and increased student support for post-secondary education between 1990 and 2000. One of the most commonly asked questions in the study of public opinion is how we as researchers can know what political actors know about public opinion on a particular issue. We may examine the results of publicly available surveys in our analysis of the

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[7] As Susan Herbst (1998) found in her analysis of American state actors' views on public opinion and democracy in *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*, political actors did not tend to rely on public opinion polling alone for a number of reasons. Thus, published polls were not getting at the whole picture of why and how actors assessed and made use of public opinion. Instead, other forms of opinion assessment such as constituent letters, letters to the editor, talk radio call-in shows, discussions with "people on the street", and briefs from lobbyists and interest groups were used more widely than were public opinion polls.

opinion-policy nexus, but it is difficult to say for sure that we know political actors

examined and used the same survey results. This study will allow the assessment of what

political actors themselves think about public opinion and about its place in policy

formation. As Susan Herbst (1998) demonstrated in her analysis of American state

actors' views on public opinion and democracy in *Reading Public Opinion: How*

Political Actors View the Democratic Process, asking political actors about their

perceptions of public opinion helped to fill certain gaps in the literature.

The Political Actors

In assessing which political actors to include in this study, it is necessary to

understand how the provincial post-secondary education policy communities are

constructed. Members of the policy communities in each province include 1) Elected

Officials (the Minister in charge of the relevant policy areas and both Opposition

Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) and Members of the Legislative Assembly

(MLAs)); 2) Legislative/Parliamentary staff (both Government and Opposition); 3)

Departmental Bureaucrats (including Assistant Deputy Ministers); 4) Party officials; 5)

the Media (both Journalists and elected officials' Communications staff); 6) Interest

Group Representatives; and 7) public opinion researchers/pollsters (those who undertake

both the publicly-accessible and unpublished polls and conducted focus groups).

1. Elected Officials

Elected officials (the Minister in charge of the relevant policy areas and both

Opposition Members of Provincial Parliament and Members of the Legislative

Assembly) play an integral part in provincial public policy communities. They have access to a wide variety of types of public opinion, ranging from public opinion research (including polls and focus groups) to discussions with the "man in the street". They are expected to represent the views of their constituents, and as they are dependent on the will of the people for "re-election", they have a unique relationship with public opinion. Elected officials normally have a keen perception of the political environment, and thus will be aware of the electoral cycle, their party's and their own political goals, and they will be interested in what proportion of the public is interested in and affected by particulate policies.

2. Government and Opposition Legislative/Parliamentary Staff

Staff in both the Minister's office and the Opposition offices responsible for these two particular policy areas will certainly have been exposed to opinions about the issues. They will have had significant interaction with other staff, members of the media, constituents, other MLAs and MPPs with concerns about the issues, and with bureaucrats in the line department. As a result, they will have integral knowledge of both the decision-making process around the two policy areas and of the role public opinion plays (or does not play) in this process. They will also be key policy makers themselves, as they will have had responsibility for advising and supporting the Minister and the Critics throughout the policy making process. As staff to elected officials, they will also be keenly aware of the political environment.

3. Media (Journalists and Communications Staff)

For this study, the media consists of two groups of people: 1) those (including print, television, and broadcast Journalists) who cover the Legislature/Provincial Parliament and government policy making for provincial and national news sources; and 2) Ministerial and Opposition communications staff who ensure that journalists have access to the necessary sources for their work. The media in its various forms clearly has a profound impact on the relationship between public opinion and public policy. As the most important mediator between "the public" and policy-makers, the media has an important function to perform in terms of information transmittal (Iyengar & Reeves, 1997).

Communications staff (particularly Communications Directors) have a fundamental role to play in transmitting information to journalists and in receiving information back. As many are former journalists themselves, they have a crucial understanding of how the media works and how best to manage both journalists and public opinion. Herbst (1998) found through her interviews with members of the media that journalists' perceptions of public opinion had a dramatic impact on how they presented political issues. When constructing stories on political issues, many reported that they wrote to a particular audience they saw as representing public opinion, rather than thinking about the results of a public opinion poll (Herbst, 1998: 109). Understanding how members of the media (including those who handle and interact with the media) see their role in public opinion creation and transmittal can help us to further understand the relationship between opinion and policy. The media would also be

expected to be aware of contextual constraints and issues and how they affected and were affected by public opinion.

4. Party Officials

Party platforms can be seen as an important element in understanding the relationship between public opinion and public policy. Platforms may be designed (at least in part) to accommodate public opinion, especially the opinions of both the "party" public and the public(s) the party wishes to appeal to in the build up to an election. Party officials, especially those who deal with platform development, will have a unique view of public opinion and its uses that will be an important piece of the puzzle of the opinion-policy nexus. [8] Officials would have a vested interested in accomplishing the party's goals, in order to be either elected or re-elected into government.

5. Bureaucrats

Integral aspects of policy making are undertaken by the line departments. Assistant Deputy Ministers (ADMs) and the Directors of Provincial Student Loan Programmes, among other senior level bureaucrats, are those most likely to be involved in higher level policy discussions, and to be aware of the Minister's needs in terms of policy outcomes and public opinion. Thus, the bureaucrats – as political actors – will be expected to be an important part of the policy community. They can be expected to have integral knowledge of the policies in place, how they are working, and what people think of them.

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[8] Herbst (1998) also surveyed "opinion leaders" – members of national conventions – to assess their perceptions of public opinion and its relationship to public policy. Party officials, especially those who work on policy platform development, will fulfill a similar role in this study.

6. Interest Group Representatives

Interest groups are an integral part of the policy community. These groups speak on behalf of particular publics and represent a particular face of public opinion, while making use of public opinion in their research and communication strategies. In both Saskatchewan and Ontario, a number of organizations representing students regularly communicate with other political actors, providing information about students' concerns and issues. In Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities represents University Presidents to the provincial government, while in Saskatchewan the individual universities' Presidents (University of Saskatchewan, University of Regina, and the First Nations' University of Canada) undertake regular communication activities.

7. Public Opinion Researchers/Pollsters

A final group of political actors to be included in the post-secondary education policy community is public opinion researchers themselves. Those who construct and use the tools of measurement for opinion (whether they are doing polling, conducting focus groups, or doing media scans) would be in a position to be advising the receivers of the results (in the case of this research, whoever commissioned the research and whoever would be reporting on or using the results) about what the results meant and how they could be used. Thus, the people who construct the questions, draw the samples, supervise the interviews, clean the data, and present the results are an important part of the policy community.

The position of public opinion researcher has continued to increase in importance to elected officials and media both between during elections. As well as conducting

research and reporting results, public opinion researchers often advise other political actors on communications strategy and the management of public opinion.

By constructing a clear picture of the issue environments, including policy discussions and public opinion data, it should be possible to gain an understanding of what happened to Ontario and Saskatchewan university tuition fees and student loan programs during the 1990s, what the public thought of these changes, and whether public opinion had any impact on policy changes. Interviewing members of the policy communities will provide information on how political actors define and view public opinion and how (if at all) it impacts them in the decision making process. This information will inform the environmental scan, and should be able to clarify our understanding of the relationship between public opinion and these provincial policy areas in the 1990s.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Working toward a more complete understanding of how both perceptions of public opinion and how various aspects of the political context impact the relationship between public opinion and public policy is an important step in the attempt to understand the relations of democracy. Using a broader definition of public opinion, one which includes sources such as letters to the editor, letters to elected officials, talk radio shows, and others is necessary for two reasons: 1) to gain a greater appreciation of the types of public opinion influencing and used by political actors, and 2) to clarify the measurable relationship between opinion and policy.

By conducting interviews with key groups of political actors in the post-secondary education policy communities in both provinces, the picture of policy making will become clearer. It will be increasingly possible to identify key interrelationships among the actors as well as between the actors and the greater public, and to create a model of decision making, using an interconnection of public opinion, media, and public policy.

Last, it is hoped that the study will assist in exploring the links between academic theory and political practice: are the definitions, issues, problems, and uses of public opinion that we as researchers identify as important the same as those that political actors themselves would highlight?   Is what we as researchers observe actually democratic responsiveness, and would the political actors involved in the policy community classify the relationship between public policy and public opinion as a responsive one? Answering these questions will help us understand more fully the nature of democratic structures and processes in Canada.

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