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PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS ON
SECURITY POLICY AND THE ARMED
FORCES:
POLICY POLLING OR SCIENTIFIC
RESEARCH?

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1. Problems of Policy Polling

As to the relationship between the Armed Forces and Society, the aspect of legitimation of the Military and defense strategies is essential in a democratic society. In terms of policy making, this is reflected as the problem of "acceptance". The traditional technocratic approach to solve this problem is opinion polling.

If a policy problem arises (or is being anticipated), the pollsters are at hand and provide the decision makers with facts and figures. This material is used to support new and/or to abolish old policies. Public opinion polling in this context is not a scientific, but a policy making instrument. At best its purpose is to describe the population's (or population segment's) opinions and attitudes **toward** policy related issues.

The polls provide us with a sort of a snapshot of people's opinions and beliefs as to a certain psychological object, but they do not study the structural components of socio-political consciousness to which opinions and beliefs are linked. Thus their analytic power necessarily is low, and even their descriptions tend to be superficial.

Looking at public opinion polling in the area of policy making, many problems have to be taken into account which are typically neglected by the pollsters, mainly for economic reasons. A widely acknowledged and - depending on the outcome of a policy poll - sometimes even welcomed fact is the instability of results: Depending on the pollsters and/or the questions, the results may change.

The reasons for this are manifold and complicated. Probably, the most important reason is the lack of an explicit theoretical relationship between the indicators (the items/questions etc.) and the objective of the study. In policy polling, the objective typically is determined by decision makers or policy makers (it is, e.g., decided to study the acceptance of the Armed Forces; of a new strategy; of an extended military service etc.). As the examples of objectives demonstrate, the objectives refer to policy making, not to the scientific community.

Looking through the glasses of a policy maker, this is, of course, not a convincing argument against policy polling. He would probably even consider the direct relationship 'between indicators and the objective of research as an advantage.

1.1. Item Context and Item Validity

In the scientific perspective, the relationship between the indicators (questions, items, statements) and latent variables the indicators are supposed to represent (attitudes, orientations), the traditional approach in the pertinent public opinion poll/survey business is straightforward in the sense of simplicity: Although the pollsters may have learned their lessons well, and thus more or less are aware of the problematic relationship between Indicators and the indicated", they tend to suggest that the results of public opinion polling may adequately be used by the public opinion poll consumer in his context, for **his own** special purpose without major problems.

The pollsters are interested in promoting the false idea that questions etc. (and the respondents' answers to them) may be conceptualized as "contextfree entities".

This idea is based on a misconception, because it does not acknowledge the fact that an individual's reaction to stimuli in general (and specifically to stimuli like questionnaire items) is complexly determined. It is not depending on the item as such, since "the item as such" does not exist, represents a fiction. Not the physical stimulus - the set of letters - is important, the **meaning is what** counts, and the meaning of an item depends on what I would like to call the **"item context"** (see Figure 1).

Traditional research of the public opinion survey type usually does not really care about the different aspects of the item context. The first aspect, the **"context of definition"**, tends to be viewed as unproblematic: the client defines the research purpose on the basis of his (political, economic etc.) interests. The polling expert professionally transcribes the clients interests and intentions. The resulting set of items is more or less accepted as an «objective" measuring instrument, which does not reflect the experts personal orientations or beliefs. Of course, things are more complicated: when thinking about a item, the expert has to make judgments, which are inevitably influenced/mediated to some extent by his consciousness, i.e. by his own general sociopolitical views, orientations, and belief systems as well as by the scientific paradigms and theories he applies.

Even if he does not feel substantial difficulties, his task is by no means simple. Verbalizing an item, the expert has to estimate the meaning this item will have for the respondent, i.e. he has to make suppositions about the reconstruction of meaning on the side of the respondent.

As Figure 1 further intends to show, the selection and formulation of Ugood items" is furthermore complicated by the context of item presentation. Peculiarities and problems of the interview situation have

Figure 1:
Context and meaning of public opinion poll items

A. Context of item definition:	B. Context of item presentation:	C. Context of item interpretation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - research purpose; - interests of the client; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - characteristics of the research situation; - position of a particular item within the set of the other items 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - general sociopolitical orientations and belief systems of the respondent; - attitudes and orientation toward the area the item addresses/indicates
<p>"intended meaning"</p> <p>mediated via the consciousness of the researcher</p>	<p>overt meaning"</p> <p>i.e. intended meaning, mediated via situational characteristics and the existence of the other items</p>	<p>"individually reconstructed meaning"</p> <p>i.e. overt meaning mediated via the consciousness of the respondent</p>
Item Meaning"		

to be taken into account, as well as the effect of the items in toto, and particularly the neighboring items. These contextual factors may modify the item to a large extent (see e.g. SCHUHMAN & PRESSER, 1981¹)

The **"overt meaning"** thus is a fiction: a stimulus of this type has no HoverC or "objective" meaning as such. Its meaning is always constructed by the respondent. If different respondents do construct the meaning a researcher intends, is difficult to assess. Therefore there is no simple solution for the problem of item validity. The individual reconstruction of "meaning input" will always take place, and the meaning the respondent finally assigns to an item text is moderated by his general sociopolitical orientations and beliefs as well as by his attitudes and orientations toward the specific **area the** item refers to.

The traditional, hermeneutically unsophisticated approach using public opinion polling lacks sensitivity to these problems. It is naive and simplistic to the degree it tends to take for granted what in fact is problematic, namely the "obvious" meaning of an item, and disregards the meaning, which is reconstructed by the respondents.

Some of the problems indicated above may be reduced by making explicit use of a theory. Its guiding function is very effective in both the context of item definition and in the context of item interpretation.

¹ Howard SCHUMAN & Stanley PRESSER: Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys. Experiments on Question Form, Wording and Context. Orlando: Academic Press, 1981.

In the context of item definition, a theory or hypothesis serves as a means to organize and circumscribe the area of interest, and provides criteria for the selection of indicators.

As sketched in Figure 1, the context of item definition is usually rather vague, and items often are selected because they are "interesting", "important", "relevant" etc., but theories or hypotheses which may have guided the definition of items are rarely named (and sometimes are not even explicitly considered).

The lack of a theory (or the lack of its explication) in the context of item definition is highly problematic, since the item definition may be rather arbitrary; without theoretical guidelines almost any item somehow referring to the research purpose or the interest of the client may be relevant, and there is no non-technical criterion which would allow to judge if an item is adequate or not.

However, the guiding function of a theory is inevitable for a **second**, and probably even more important reason: as indicated in Figure 1, the researcher furthermore has to solve the difficult problem to infer the most probable individually reconstructed meaning. Since the individual reconstruction of an item is influenced by the individual's general sociopolitical views, belief systems, and orientations (see Figure 1), a (social) psychological theory is needed, which allows deductions and inferences concerning the reconstruction of meaning of security policy related items by the individual's sociopolitical consciousness.

But such a theory is not only needed in the process of construction of a public opinion polling instrument. It is as well important for the interpretation of research results.

Thus it follows, that instruments measuring general socio-political orientations and the like should be part of any questionnaire dealing with security policy attitudes and orientations. If one did not include instruments of this kind, the interpretation of the data on security policy orientations would largely depend on "hidden speculations"; theoretically inferred relationships could not be tested empirically.

Neglecting the problems of context and meaning is typical for policy polling (but also seems to be no exception elsewhere). Anyway, the risk of misinterpretation of such survey results is high for the decision maker.

1.2 Cognitive Context of Opinions

The model of man (more precisely: the model of the individual's mind), which is - perhaps often unconsciously - applied in policy polling, is oversimplified. Opinions, beliefs, attitudes, orientations, and values are not separate entities. Representing elements of an individual's social consciousness, they are related to each other in a complex manner. The structural basis is represented by values which are **themselves** interrelated.² As the most basic concepts of an individual's social and political consciousness, they assign affective (positive or negative) quality to orientations, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. In the sense of Milton ROKEACH, the

² to be brief, this simplification is inevitable here

values denote (or refer to) end- states of existence the individual wants to approach, respectively seeks to avoid.

The bottom of the hierarchy, so to say most distant from the affective-emotional basis of consciousness, is represented by opinions. Following this model of cognitive organization, opinions are not very, resistant to change because their affective component, and thus their link to values, is rather small.

Summarizing the evidence, policy polling frequently neglects that

- opinions are elements of the hierarchically organized belief system of an individual. This belief system, simply stated, represents a person's more or less logically and or psychologically coherent way to view and explain the world;
- single opinions are organized around attitudes, which represent the second level of the hierarchy. While attitudes have a cognitive, an affective, and a behavioral component (i.e. comprise preferences for, respectively aversions toward a-subject), opinions are at the lowest level of the hierarchy. They are elements of information (no matter if - objectively speaking - the information is correct or incorrect) and represent a person's beliefs with respect to a specific subject.

1.3 Centrality and Salience

A second structural component, which is very important in this context, also tends to be neglected in policy polling: the component **of centrality**. By this I mean the degree of salience and the **personal** importance a psychological object has for an individual. If, for instance, an individual is interested in security policy and the Armed Forces, his or her opinions and beliefs concerning this area are likely to be more differentiated and more stable than those of an individual, who does not care about this psychological object.

This difference of elaboration and stability depending on the centrality of a psychological object has a very important consequence for policy polling: other things being equal, policy polling leads to artificial results the more, the less central a psychological object is for the respondents. In summary, policy polling tends to neglect that

- the number of a person's opinions is limited. Other parameters like degree of education, political engagement etc. being equal, the set of opinions is the larger and the more elaborated, the more salient or important an object is for an individual;
- opinions concerning a non-salient object may change or may be influenced relatively easily;
- information seeking mainly refers to salient objects;
- dissonant information (i.e. information which does not fit into a belief system) is more unlikely to be integrated than consonant information. Disregarding dissonant information is the more probable, the more salient the psychological object is.

The individual psycho-logical reasoning which led to the aggregated opinions is not represented in public opinion. It merely focusses on the aggregated result of

individual reasoning and evaluation, but disregards the process of opinion formation, respectively the reasons of non-opinion/indifference.

Another, **less obvious**, consequence of salience/centrality should be noted as well: mass public policy polling is the more problematic, the more elaborated the questions are, and the more "correct expert language" is used. If mass polling refers to a non-central psychological object like the Armed Forces, the questions/items must be formulated in accordance with the laymen's wording, i.e. using everyday language -even if the experts in the field (e.g. security policy experts) would probably consider the item-texts as "inadequate" or "misleading". If this caveat is not taken into account, the data obtained in a poll may be arbitrary, and thus unstable, to a considerable degree. In general, the lack of laymen's expertise should not be dramatized by the experts, because the respondent's ability to decode "moderate" expert language, as it is often being used in the media, is much higher than the respondent's ability to actively communicate in this language.

In summary: to avoid mistakes of policy polling, it is best to use scientific approaches, which take into account the problems of meaning and context, the relevance of centrality, and the fact, that opinions and beliefs are linked to general socio-political orientations and value structures. If these structural components are neglected, the formation and the change of opinions and beliefs cannot be described and explained sufficiently. Since the same response to a question or item may have a very different structural foundation, basic structures like socio-political orientations and values should be part of any serious scientific polling in the area of security policy.

1.4 Definition of the Public

Principally trivial, but frequently neglected in policy polling, is a careful look at the **public** whose opinion is under consideration. By far the most frequently applied means to express public opinion is the pattern of answers to a survey question. In this case, **however**, the public usually is not clearly defined, i.e. it is unclear, if the set of people, whose opinions are aggregated, do indeed represent a public with respect to the survey questions. If, for example, a question refers to SLCM,³ the implicit assumption that a representative sample of the population really represents a public for this questions, surely does not make much sense. Since information as well as salience are lacking for most of the individuals, the responses will be unstable, inconsistent, and largely irrelevant. In a case like this it is obvious that "representativeness of a sample", which so often is claimed as a proof for the quality of a poll by the pollsters and those using the polls in political communication, is not a sufficient criterion of relevance.

The public denotes, abstractly speaking, a segment of a population, i.e. a subset of all human beings which is characterized by certain common attributes, i.e. attributes shared by all individuals of the population. The attributes may be more or less visible, like in the cases of gender, age, race etc. The communality may be defined by legal status, by nationality, by family status, by civil rights (i.e. voter or non voter), by obligations like military service/conscription, or by constitutional rights like

³ Sea Launched Cruise Missile

conscientious objection. Belonging to a certain profession may be such an attribute, being a partisan of a political party or a social movement, watching television, or reading a certain newspaper.

Typically, surveys in the area of security policy are highly problematic (particularly if the samples are "representative") because security policy and related matters do not represent important issues for most individuals. Security policy in its bits and pieces is not a "Moorstep - issue" in the Western societies, and traditionally it has been the domain of an expert community.

Thus surveys should be tailored towards the public on which opinion information is lacking.

These considerations show that the attributes constituting a particular public may be rather complex. They demonstrate several important facts:

- (1) each individual, principally speaking, belongs to particular publics;
- (2) publics do not exist per se, but are defined by common attributes;
- (3) since an infinity of combination of attributes may theoretically be defined, a particular public is rather a construct than an entity.

When the media, or politicians, use the term public, they usually refer to a subset of the population, which is not defined by attributes of the kind we have been looking at a moment ago. In the context of the media and politics, the public is implicitly conceived as being characterized by attributes like the following, and thus comprising a large number of individuals:

- some degree of attention for the media in general (eventually, the preference of particular media);
- some degree of interest in political issues, events, campaigns etc.;
- some degree of political information and knowledge.

In summary, it is assumed that mass communication on a given subject, so to say, "finds" its recipients, because it somehow meets individual needs and interests. The public in this sense typically is a only very loosely defined large set of individuals.

In analogy to personal opinion, this concept of public opinion is based on the tacit assumption that the loosely defined aggregate, which we may call a mass, "naturally" has an opinion more or less towards each subject of political interest and thus also toward the area of security policy and the military.

3. Public Opinion in the Context of Political Legitimation and Political Information: Towards a Processual Conception of Public Opinion

Policy polling is associated with the idea that public opinion is something like a measurable, stable entity. However, the concept of public opinion is much more complicated, because public opinion rather is a complex process than a stable entity.

Of course, the Unon-dynamiC concept of public opinion is important, but it refers, as my following definition shall demonstrate, to the outcome of the process, not to the process itself: (polled) public opinion is conceived as the degree of acceptance, rejection, and indifference⁴ towards a psychological object, expressed by a particular aggregate of persons, reflected in particular means of expression,⁵ at a particular time, and in a particular socio-political context.

Until now, we have no satisfying means to measure the process of public opinion, but we can - to some extent and with the many caveats mentioned above - assess the outcome of the process at a particular time and in a particular socio-political context.

The rather complex interplay of factors influencing public opinion is briefly outlined in Fig. 2. While this figure calls for a more extensive discussion (which is not possible here, and shall be the subject of a forthcoming paper), I would like to draw the attention to the following points, here being summarized in the form of theses:

- public opinion rather is a dynamic process than a static entity
- public opinion, public information, and political legitimation are mutually interrelated
- the mission of the Armed Forces is formally defined in the constitution/basic legislation of each state (**constitutional legitimation**), and influenced by contracts with other states, particularly the Alliance in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany and other member of NATO (**contractual legitimation**). Concrete policies are politically (and thus in a dynamic process) executed mainly by the government/the MoD.

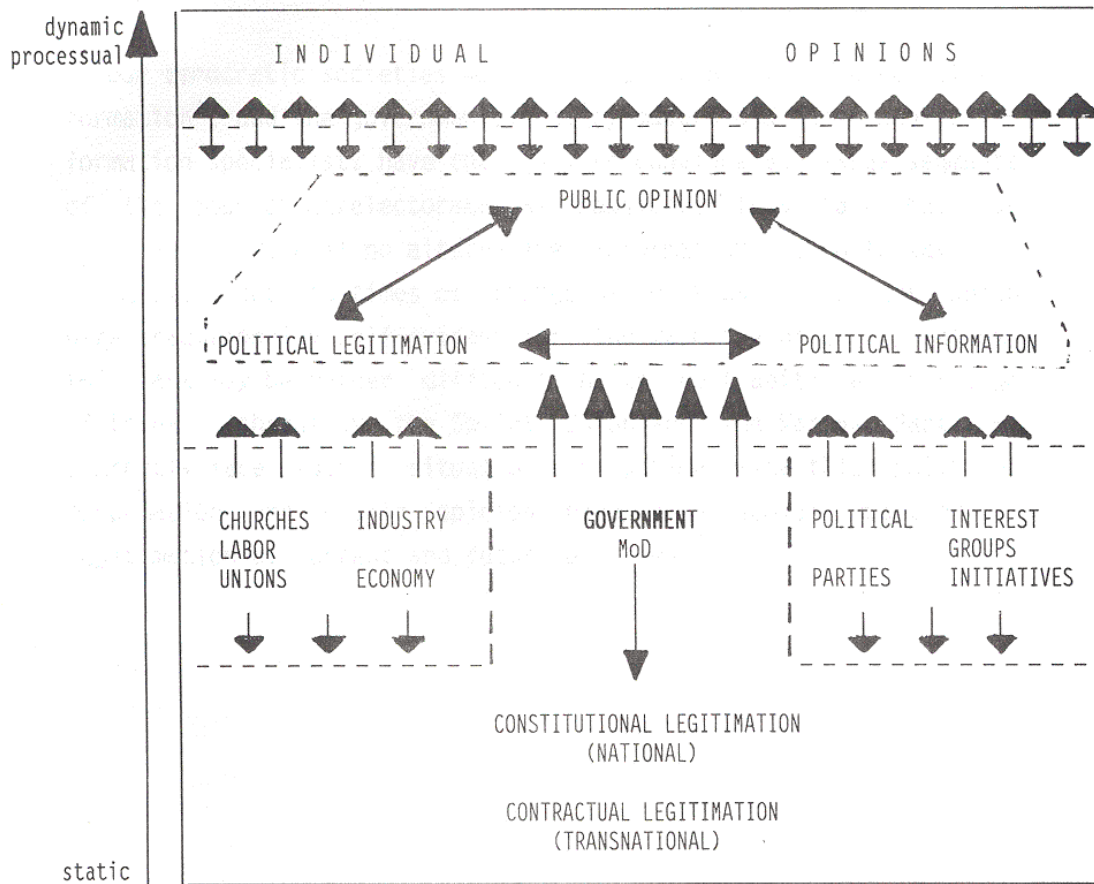
However, other institutions/parties/groups also have a substantial influence on policy formation via their own channels and policies of public information and personal communication. They may provide the public with information, which usually is consonant with their own interests, but tends to be different to the information provided by the government/the MoD;

Figure 2: ARMED FORCES AND SECURITY POLICY Legitimation, political information, and public opinion⁶

⁴ all three components taken together are important, since salience and centrality are most relevant.

⁵ usually in survey results

⁶ This schematic representation merely is thought as a tool facilitating the discussion of factors being relevant in the context of the dynamics of public opinion. To serve this purpose, a grossly simplified symbolization has been used; thus many sources/directions of influence are not (or not adequately) represented (particularly the mutual influences of institutions, and their direct or indirect impact on governmental/MoD policies).



- in our democratic societies we thus find a kind of a "market of information", and the governmental policy makers and their public information specialists have the task to convince as large segments of the population/electorate as possible. This task may be relatively simple if no alternative information is, so to say, on the market. But in times of change of political paradigms, which were traditionally self-evident for the majority of a population, this task may be rather difficult. As to the traditional paradigm of threat (threat by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact), we currently face such a situation. In a time like this, political information and public opinion have a particular impact on the legitimation of current and future policies.

Arrows indicate the primary directedness and strength/power of influence. A double headed arrow symbolizes a predominantly mutual influence.