

# The Critical Role of Public Opinion in Shaping Democracy: An Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

**Public opinion is important role in a democracy. This paper ensures policies serve the masses, legitimizes governance, and forces social change. This paper highlights public opinion are family, intelligentsia, press, cinema, radio and television, educational institutions, platform, political parties, legislature and opinion polls. The role of media in society is crucial in shaping public opinion, encouraging awareness, and manipulating social change. Public opinion enhances various belongings on how policy is made or viewed. The massive forces of public opinion represented throughout the electorate decisions.**

**Keywords: democracy, institutions, public, opinion, government, power social and political**

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## INTRODUCTION

The role and importance of public opinion has to be understood in the context of democracy. Democracy is a form of government which is based on public opinion respects and acts according to public opinion. The representatives or rulers in a democracy are account or answerable to the people. This is possible through public opinion which is freely and effectively expressed. Public opinion enhances the mass of ideas and decisions, working in a community. Public opinion is an extremely important role in the confining of powers, forming government and also keeping the government in the successive.

It is put opinion which determines whether the government in power is performing satisfactorily or not. If not. In the next elections, public opinion will decide against the continuance of the government and elect a new one. "The power of public opinion was closely tied to the expansion of literacy, the growth of the press, and the rise of mass political participation. Politicians held large local meetings and their speeches were widely disseminated" (Asa Briggs 1959: 93) The verdict of the people is expressed not only at the time of elections, but also through the various agencies of public opinion sat as newspapers, radio, television, etc. During elections electoral behaviour, i.e., the trends or the pattern of voting are determined by public opinion. Public opinion can do and undo governments. Thus, public opinion plays a role in modern democracy. In fact democracy self is defined as a government responsive to public opinion. Democracy and public opinion are inseparable. It is a well accepted fact today that the success of democracy depends upon an effective public opinion.

Public opinion is a very powerful social and political force, which cannot be ignored in the modern world. To ignore it would mean trouble to the ruling party and to members of the legislatures individually. "Opinion plays a vital role in uncovering some critical decisions. Sentiment analysis or opinion mining is a method used to mine the thoughts or feelings of the general population" (Zeng 2023: 97) In the advanced countries of the world, therefore, political parties, governments, newspapers and other institutions devote much attention and spend lot of money in shaping or moulding the public opinion. In dictatorships also public opinion plays an important role in modern times. Dictatorships are afraid of public opinion as much as democratic governments. Dictatorships try to mould and control public opinion through propaganda. In communist countries public opinion is controlled and even created by the government. Thus public opinion is the life-line of the modern state.

The following are the vital functions of public opinion in the modern democratic state.

- (a) Public opinion creates political awareness among the people.
- (b) An alert and intelligent public opinion makes the government to explain its stand to the people.

- (c) Public opinion provides an opportunity to the rulers to know the attitude and aspirations of the people.
- (d) If the ruling party neglects public opinion, the opposition will take advantage and may overthrow.
- (e) A strong public opinion is a check upon the government, and will stop it from becoming despotic
- (f) Public opinion will always expose the shortcomings and misdeeds of the rulers and bureaucrats.

### **The Agencies of Public Opinion:**

The main agencies which mould public opinion are (1) Family. (2) Intelligentsia, (3) Press, (4) Cinema (5) Radio and television, (6) Educational Institutions, (7) Platform, 8) Political parties. 9). Legislature, and 10) Opinion polls. These agencies may be briefly described as follows:

**1) Family:** Public opinion is formulated by many agencies. But the family comes first. It influences the thinking of the individual at a very early age. Its influence also continues for a long period of time. Hence, among the agencies which mould public opinion, a place of priority must be given to the family. It is in the family that a person develops habits, likes and dislikes. The ideas, attitudes, orthodox outlook or progressive outlook, opinion regarding politicians, political parties, etc. are imbibed from the family by individuals. These manifest themselves through the life of the individual. Caste, communal and other narrow attitudes also develop in the background the family. Thus, family is a very important factor in the formation of public opinion.

**2) Intelligentsia:** Intelligentsia is the collective wisdom of the society. It is the group of those people who possess real knowledge of various issues and problems concerning the nation. It expresses itself through newspapers and other means of communication magazines, journals and the radio and television. It educates the people on political affairs; these persons are important in their approach and take an objective outlook on political matters. The general public attach great importance their ideas. They are also known as opinion leader Legislators, journalists, administrators, social workers religious preachers, scholars and researchers are a small group of people in the society who function as formulates of public opinion. They make and mould public opinion by reacting to policies and events as they take place. As the large majority of the people are either illiterate inadequately informed) or indifferent to public affairs, they usually accept the views of these opinion leaders. Thus opinion originates with a few, is communicated to the many who transform it into public opinion

**3) Press:** Press of the newspaper is an important agency of formation of public opinion. People depends upon it to get information and form their opinion. The daily newspaper reports national and international events, policies of the government and proceedings of legislature. It also expresses views and comments. "Social media affects public opinion as content that is created and shared can affect how individuals form an opinion on societal issues" (Neubaum, 2017:502 ) Thus, it is not only reports facts, but also interprets them and comments upon them. It functions as a forum for the expression of the views and opinions of the people regarding matters & government cannot neglect such reactions of the people public importance and governmental policies. The government cannot neglect such reaction of the people. The press is a very powerful agency of public opinion Walter Lippmann called it the "Bible of Democracy". Newspapers attempt to influence public opinion ordinary citizens who are not well informed, tend to the views as presented in the newspapers.

**4) Cinema:** The cinema is mainly a source of entertainment to the masses. Still, it has substantial influence on the formation of public opinion. Newspapers influence only the educated people. On the other hand, the cinema has impact on the illiterate masses. It is only a few people who read newspapers. But almost all the people see films. Cinema enjoys widespread popularity, and can play an important role in eliminating social evils. It can arouse the interest of the people in social, economic and political problems of the country.

**5) Radio and Television:** These are the electronic mass media of communication. Radio and television are effective instruments to educate the people in public affairs and to formulate public opinion. These are audio-visual methods which appeal to illiterates as well as literate and well educated. According to historian Aled Jones, the energies released by Victorian politics promoted a "lively and heterogeneous press, and the emergence of reformed political and administrative systems were the subjects of intense scrutiny and speculation by journalists and their readers throughout Britain"( Aled Jones 1990: 63) Radio and television not only provide entertainment but also educate the masses through news reporting and programmes focusing on social, political and economic problems facing the country. These two media operate in both urban and rural areas. Politicians, ministers and political parties approach the radio and television for gaining publicity for their ideas, policies and programmes. These two media establish a dynamic link between the masses and the government. In this manner, the radio and television shape and mould public opinion.

**6) Educational Institutions:** Universities, colleges and schools constitute educational institutions, which t another important agency of public opinion, Educational institutions exercise indirect influence on public opinion. They not only prepare the younger generation for various vocations or professions, but also create in them a vision and a meaning for life.

A right attitude of mind can be developed at primary and secondary levels. Colleges and universities prepare men and women to think on a large scale. Lot of intellectual development, growth of critical abilities, and character building take place in these institutions. It may be noted that the press, the electro media (radio and television) and political parties may be regarded as formulators of current public opinion. Whereas, educational institutions may be considered as formulators of future opinion. Schools, colleges and universities prepare the citizens of tomorrow. They create civic consciousness in them. Ultimately, the young students grow up enlightened citizens with independent views and opinions. They become capable of moulding public opinion

**7) Public Platform:** Platform functions as a public forum. The freedoms of peaceful assembly and speech are the basis of the formation of public opinion. The two freedoms can be realized through the platform. The platform or public meetings provide an opportunity politician, ministers, scholars and others to establish direct contacts with the people. The platform enables the leaders to communicate their views to the people, who get the opportunity to know about policies, issues, etc., in first hand. Similarly, the leaders can get direct knowledge of the people's reactions. Opinion leaders representing different sections of the community organize meeting, seminars and conferences to place their views before the people and to mould public opinion.

**8) Political parties:** The role of political parties in the formulation of public opinion is very important. They inform the voters about the issues and problems on the country as well as about their policies and programmes. In general, the masses are lazy and indifferent to public affairs. Political parties awaken the masses and make them the citizens and the government. Political parties hold public aware. The political party is also a connecting link between meetings to explain their views and ideas. They distribute pamphlets and other literature on important issues during elections. They publish their manifestoes to explain their stand on important public issues. Thus, political parties contribute to the formation of public opinion.

**9) Legislature:** The legislature is regarded as the barometer of public opinion and a 'mirror of public opinion. Legislatures are bodies which represent different shades of public opinion and different interests. The policies and programmes of the government, measures or bills to be enacted are discussed and debated in detail in the houses of the legislature. In this respect, legislature reflects public opinion on public policies and measures before they finally become law. The proceedings of the debates and discussions on the floor of the legislature are published in the newspapers and reported on the radio and television. This exercises a lot of influence on the minds of the masses and helps them to form their opinion on various issues. Legislatures are, thus, an important agency in the formulation of public opinion in all modern states

**10) Opinion Polls:** Opinion polls provide a significant and popular method to gather public opinion. These were earlier used by business houses to assess consumer choices about their products. These are now being used to gather information about public attitude and opinion on variety of political matters including their opinion on issues of local or national importance, their preference for political parties and leaders in elections to be held their views on governmental policies or specific events. "Exit polls can give journalists and social scientists a greater understanding of why voters voted the way they did and what factors contributed to their vote" (Asher, Herbert B. (2017) These opinion polls are generally conducted by professional agencies selecting representative samples of population. Opinion polls help political parties formulate their electoral strategies, adjust their programmes and make necessary alliances during elections. These may provide government with feedback of people's level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction from its policies as also convey the expectations and aspirations.

While, in general, opinion polls have been a useful instrument to find public opinion, they have always not been correct. In countries like India there are various problems in conducting objective and correct surveys. These include large size of population, Illiteracy, lack of awareness and apprehensions among people about the purpose of surveys and therefore, the tendency not to give correct information. Also, some critics point out that opinion polls are being used more to create public opinion than to gather and report it. Political parties in particular quite often criticize opinion polls of deliberately favouring to or other political party.

## CONCLUSION

Public opinion has an important role in a modern democracy. Public opinion pursues upon free speech, free exchange of ideas, of judgments and opinions. Social media has appeared as an influential instrument in determining public opinion and political dialogue in modern society. In spite of all criticisms, the opinion polls and surveys are becoming very popular and are being used by all, including governments, political parties and researchers as a useful method to understand analyze public opinion.

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