

The public opinion about public opinion polls

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Perception of the term “public” has undergone a complex historical development. In very simple terms “it gradually turned from the original meaning of public as a social elite consisting of independent, educated and committed citizens to the concept of plural publics, which are often a synonym for all public.¹” (Rendlová, Lebeda, 2002: 9). According to the Big Dictionary of Sociology the term public is currently understood as “a larger part of the society (or nation, people) involved in the outcomes of economic and social activities with a more general effect, in the solution of a certain social problem, or in social events as such.” (1996: 1382).

Sociology usually surveys responses or opinions as a public product – the so-called public opinion – in the form of quantitative standardized questionnaire researches on a representative sample of the population. In this context we talk about a public opinion poll. In this concept the public opinion poll is empirically processed as a sum of individual attitudes and opinions.

The CVVM research executed in May 2005 included questions focused on the public opinion polls as such. Interest in public opinion poll results divided the group in two halves. The sum of positive answers “very interested” and “quite interested” was 48 %; the sum of negative answers “not very interested“ and “not at all interested” was 51 %.^{2, 3} The respondents, who did not completely deny their interest in the public opinion poll results, consequently answered to what extent they allowed the results to affect them. Absolute majority (79 %) of respondents do not form their opinion according to the public opinion poll results. This fact, however, begs the question: to what extent are individuals able to identify all the elements that participate in the forming of their opinions? According to Jirák and Köpplová, the essential carriers of public opinion for the members of a modern society are first of all the media that have been publishing the public opinion polls results roughly from the second half of the twentieth century. The receivers then express their position to the results for example

¹ For example for the use of common public polls, which should be representative for the Czech Republic, the basis of the selection constitutes of all citizens of the Czech Republic (in case of the Centre for Public Opinion Research also foreigners with a long-term residence permit in the Czech Republic) usually over fifteen, possibly over eighteen years of age.

² The difference of three percentage points if not statistically relevant.

³ When we compared the data according to various socio-demographic features, it turned out that the interest in public poll results is more frequent among people with high school education or university education. In case of other questions, dependence on the socio-demographic features was not ascertained.

by agreeing or disagreeing with them or by changing their opinion about them (2003). “Public opinion polls thus become an expression and a corrector of public opinion, or even its co-creator” (Jiráč, Köpplová, 2003: 92). A public opinion poll results presented in the media do not necessarily have to directly form people’s opinions and attitudes. However, they can affect what people think about or what they discuss with their friends, etc. People can therefore indirectly change their original opinion or opinion of other people.⁴

The question asking whether public opinion polls is an exact or a distorted reflection of the public opinion divided the group of the questioned in two even subgroups (40 % of respondents in the sum of answers “very exactly” and “rather directly,” 41 % of respondents in the sum of answers “rather distortedly” and “very distortedly”). In comparison with the interest in the public opinion polls, however, significantly larger number of respondents (19 %) was not able to comment this question and chose the answer “I do not know.”

Table 1: Opinions about the public opinion polls (in %)

Wording of the question:	Very interested	Quite interested	Not very interested	Not at all interested
To what extent are you personally interested in the results of public opinion polls? (N = 1087)	6	42	36	15
	Very affected	Quite affected	Not much affected	Not at all affected
To what extent do public opinion poll results affect your opinion? (N = 908)	2	18	53	26
	Very exact	Quite exact	Rather distorted	Very distorted
Do you think that public opinion poll results are an exact or a distorted reflection of public opinion? (N = 1087)	2	38	36	5

Source: CVVM, Our Society 2005 (Naše společnost 2005), survey 05-05

Note: The total 100 % is completed by answers “doesn’t know.”

⁴ Social sciences call the process, in which the public opinion is spread from the media to the so-called opinion leaders, who subsequently pass it on to the less active groups of citizens, a “two-tier communication flow.” The hypothesis of two-tier communication flow was first formulated in 1944 in a book called Public choice, written by P. F. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson and H. Gaudet (Šubrt, 1998).

Among the list of themes that should be, according to the respondents, the subject of public opinion polls, political issues apparently prevailed. One quarter of the questioned mentioned the same theme in different modifications (for example political situation, pre-election researches, popularity of politicians). Health system, unemployment, work and salary conditions and life standard of the citizens placed second. One tenth of the questioned believe that these issues should be the subjects of public polls (see Table 2).

Table 2: Themes that should be the subject of public opinion polls (in %)⁵

Theme	abs.	%
Politics – politicians, political situation	259	24
Health-care system, health	120	11
Unemployment, work, salaries	119	11
Problems of common people	104	10
Financial situation, life standard of people, taxes	94	9
Crime, delinquency, corruption, safety	82	8
Market survey, quality, accessibility of products	76	7
Lifestyle, free time, hobbies, culture	73	7
Schooling system, erudition, education	69	6
Social issues, social securities, social problems	64	6
Youth, children – upbringing, problems, free time	63	6
Environment, ecology, nature	59	5
Pensions, social security scheme for elderly people	49	5
Economy	45	4
Interpersonal relations – family, partnership	43	4
Accommodation, rent, accessibility	28	3
European Union – constitution, access to EU	27	2
Regional and local issues, city-country	24	2
Transportation – safety, timetables	23	2
Functioning of state administration – legislative, police	22	2
Ethics, values – euthanasia, death penalty	19	2
Drugs, prostitution, homeless people, alcohol	18	2
Minorities – Romany issue, homosexuals	17	2
Women – equality, working conditions	16	1
Media – viewer or listener rate, violence in media	10	1
Law, acts	9	1
Foreign affairs – international situation	8	1
Democracy, functioning of democracy	6	1
Agriculture	6	1
Public life personalities, celebrities	6	1
Banks and financial institutions	2	0
Science and researches	2	0
None	8	1
Other	33	3
Indefinite answers, by all	115	11
Does not know, is not interested	100	9
Total	1818	171

Source: CVVM, Our Society survey 2005, 05-05

⁵ Exact wording of the question: What themes do you think should be the subject of public polls?

Note: Every respondent could mention up to two answers, the percentage sum is therefore 200 %. The sum of 200 % is completed by the answers that were not used. N = 1088 respondents, 2176 possible answers.

In case of other themes we have not gathered sufficient number of respondents to make any relevant conclusions. The list of themes proves that the public has a relatively good idea about the subject of public opinion polls.

Literature:

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