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HOW DO WE STUDY THE PUBLIC?

A series on studying the public

The Crick Centre
Understanding Politics

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INTRODUCTION

How do we study the public? This simple question provided the framework for the second seminar in our Crick Centre series on 'Studying the Public'. It is a question that underpins the work of many social scientists, but is often not widely discussed. In the context of methodological training that prompts a qualitative or quantitative divide, the means of detecting and monitoring public opinion and behaviours can look very different. On the one hand, quantitative scholars promote public opinion surveys or analysis of large data sets that allow public behaviour to be discerned. Whilst, on the other, qualitative scholars employ interviews, focus groups and ethnographies to observe how members of the public think and act. This divide between qualitative and quantitative therefore points to very different ways of conceptualising and monitoring the public, and yet they are methods that can be combined – with scholars mobilising both methods to generate knowledge claims.

Despite the diversity of available methods for studying the public, it is often the case that many observers and academics alike reify quantitative methods as the most robust and reliable means of generating data on public views and behaviour. Indeed, the language and logics of quantitative methods often dominate how we assess the validity of data on the public, with talk of representativeness, generalisability and robustness. It is therefore common to find policy makers and journalists drawn to survey data, whilst rejecting results from focus groups or vox pops as unreliable or unrepresentative. This tendency raises important questions about the relationship between our conceptualisation of the public and the methods we decide to use. Is it necessary to strive for generalisability, or are there other methods and knowledge claims that can offer valuable insights for those interested in the public?

In this workshop, we invited three different scholars with alternative methodological backgrounds to reflect on their methods and understanding of the public. First, we heard from Dr Liam Stanley, a political economist with expertise in using focus groups. Second, from Professor Charles Pattie, a psephologist with expertise in survey analysis and quantitative techniques. And finally, from Dr Nikki Soo, a political communications scholar with expertise in ethnography, and online diary studies.

Convening this panel, we asked them to reflect on three different questions:

- In what different ways can we gather data on the public?
- What can be claimed from the data we gather?
- How do we integrate or value different methods of data collection?

What was notable from the discussion was the need to think about the value of different knowledge and the benchmarks that we use to assess the insights of different claims. It was also argued that studying the public in itself requires humility from scholars. Rather than always setting out with predefined questions that could be answered by surveying public views, it was argued that researchers could learn much from the public, who often provided unexpected responses and insights that could enhance research design and data collection. Outlining their discussion, each scholar has provided a summary of their arguments and perspective below. At the end of the report, we have provided some food for thought by way of questions to stimulate further debate, as well as a reading list.

Dr Kate Dommett
Dr Nikki Soo

CAN PUBLIC OPINION EVER BE MEASURED QUALITATIVELY?

Dr Liam Stanley

Researching the public understanding of politics has scarcely been more important. Yet this is a field that is dominated by quantitative studies, whereby 'the public' is typically reduced either to public opinion or voting behaviour. I was asked by the Crick Centre to reflect on how we could and should study public understandings of politics. In particular, I was asked whether we can study it in a qualitative way. In this short blog post, I will make the case that we cannot study 'public opinion' using qualitative methods, but that there remains many different and legitimate ways to study the public understanding of politics from a qualitative perspective.

In making this argument, I'd like to bring attention to both the character of public opinion and of the qualitative-quantitative methodological divide. 'Public opinion' is a quantitative concept designed for quantitative methods; it is also the common sense and orthodox way to study public understandings of politics. While qualitative methods can be used to study public understanding of politics more generally, they cannot be used to study public opinion. A different terminology is required. While this may appear arcane, this reflects fundamental methodological differences between the two methodologies. In doing so, the predominance of quantitative methods as common sense in both academia and beyond needs to be challenged. I will discuss this in relation to focus groups, a method that I have some experience in using.

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Focus groups — or group interviews, if you prefer — are unique: they provide us with a method to generate data on how a small group of people discuss, make sense of, and tell stories about certain (political) issues. The resulting data can be very rich and therefore helpful in understanding the worlds in which people inhabit. The methodological trade-off is obvious: you get rich and unique data, but it is difficult to 'scale up' that data from the immediate milieu in which it was collected. How do you generalise from a discussion of say, 40 people across 8 discussions in a specific locale to, say, something meaningful, rigorous, and robust about something to do with 'the public'? And how do you know that people are telling the truth? Or, how do you get a representative sample?

Before jumping into the answers, we need to challenge the terms of these questions. In this context, qualitative research on the public and focus groups in particular is destined to fail when asked to fit these values. 'Representative sample' is, for example, a statistical term that is only intelligible in those terms. A representative sample is an essential component in many quantitative methods for studying public understanding of politics. By aggregating individual preferences and beliefs from a systematically random sample and extrapolating that onto a wider population, these methods are able to say some rigorous and meaningful about the public. Although this is technically difficult to achieve, it is philosophically uncontroversial.

Qualitative research does not fit with this. If you are interviewing 40 people in a specific locale, a 'representative sample' is impossible. Although quantitative methods for studying the public are and will be always highly valuable, the assumptions and value systems of quantitative methods double-up as the implicit assumptions and value systems for social sciences as a whole — and even, to some extent, society itself. Qualitative research cannot live up to these values, and are set up to fail on these terms. We can therefore benefit from developing an alternative vocabulary and conceptual foundation for qualitative methods into studying the public understanding of politics. We need qualitative concepts for qualitative methods. Here, I'd like to propose three ways of rethinking this foundation — all of which will be familiar to those versed in qualitative methodology.

The first move is to rethink the unit of analysis. In quantitative methods, the unit of analysis is the individual. And in particular, it is their beliefs and attitudes (accessed through survey questions, for example) or their behaviour (recorded through voting, for example). With respect to the former, there is often an assumption that the true beliefs and attitudes of an individual are accessible to the researcher; otherwise, there wouldn't be so much concern over the potentially biased or misleading wordings of question. In some qualitative research and in focus groups in particular, the unit of the analysis is not the individual. Rather, it is something social: typically something to do with the social constitution of the worlds that we inhabit and make. In concrete terms, this might mean that the unit of analysis might be peoples' experiences, the kind of shared narratives that people with similar experiences tell, and the process in which identities are made, remade, and contested. These are phenomena that cannot be captured through quantitative methods.

The second move is to rethink sampling. Theories and practices of sampling are less established and accepted in qualitative research when compared to quantitative counterparts. Representative sampling cannot work in qualitative research. If a sample is, say, less than a hundred, then the idea that several people can represent a particular demographic is politically, ethically, and methodologically dangerous. Rather than throw systematic sampling out the window, however, a qualitative alternative is to use what's known as 'theoretical sampling'. If the unit of the analysis is social rather than individual, such as a certain type of lived experience, then one can purposively sample say, two or three localised groups with theoretically-meaningful difference in their lived experience, so to generate meaningful comparisons that can be analysed and extrapolated from.

The third move is to rethink scaling up. Scaling up in quantitative research is philosophically straightforward: generalisability means scaling up from a representative sample to a wider population. One qualitative alternative scaling up strategy is analytical generality. If you have, for example, conducted five focus groups in the same area, with people who have similar experiences, and you find that in those five groups that the same narratives and identities are emerging in each one; then one can be reasonably sure that there's some sort of shared phenomenon going on there; which can be unpicked through transparent and coherent theorising. In other words, one can scale up by making a sort of wager: that those lived experiences have a consistent and structural pattern that we theorise as typical.

These are three ways of challenging the quantitative common sense of researching the public understanding of politics. By using a qualitative unit of analysis, sampling strategy, and scaling up method, we can make rigorous claims about how the public understand politics. Does this mean that we can conduct qualitative studies of public opinion? If the public means an amalgamation of individual opinions and beliefs — which is how public opinion is commonly conceived and discussed — then no. Public opinion is intrinsically bound up with quantitative methods. My suggestion for a qualitative alternative to the quantitative concept of public opinion is everyday narratives. This involves analysing how the public tell stories about politics. This means studying what sort of politics these stories justify or contest and how the identities and narratives that underpin these make and remake the very boundaries of legitimate political action. This is one way that qualitative research in the public understanding of politics can be highly valuable to scholars and non-scholars alike.

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GIVING THEM A VOICE: AN APPROACH TO STUDYING PUBLIC OPINION BETTER

Dr Nikki Soo

Public opinion is a 'contested and malleable concept' (Herbst, 1998: 2), making it important to understand how the choice of approach, the data collected, as well as its evaluation, constructs the very opinion we are seeking to measure and understand. Various approaches come to mind when we think about collecting data on public opinion, but the dominant approach often taken or mentioned is the use of quantitative results, usually from a mass survey or more recently, social media metrics. These sources are often relied on by politicians, policymakers and journalists, legitimising them, subsequently enhancing their status in the public eye. Despite the dominance of quant methods, it is not the only way of gathering data and conducting research. As a compulsively curious person I am often drawn to the nitty gritty details, beyond the output of quantitative methodologies. Indeed, my own research focuses on qualitative methods that not only allows me to understand public opinion in detail, and as I show in the following, refine quantitative opinion data collection. I gather information directly from the members of public I am studying, letting the voice of the public I am trying to understand take centrestage. These can be interviews, focus groups and diaries. Individuals can tell me in their own words, and sometimes show me, how they think and what they are feeling. This approach is otherwise known as social constructivism, a tradition of scholarship that brings into focus the processes and its human relationships, relating it to society. Unlike quantitative outcomes, data and findings from these methods provide an opportunity for the social and collective components of their public opinion formation to emerge, an aspect of public opinion examination that is often neglected (Blumer, 1948). In this piece I discuss my experience of using a qualitative method to complement quantitative and behavioural data methods, and how this can be applied to public opinion research.

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To illustrate how qualitative research methods can contribute to better understanding of public opinion, I will discuss my experience in a previous project where I used the method of online diaries to offer a different but valuable contribution quantitative studies. I worked with Dr Marta Cantijoch at the University of Manchester, in partnership with the BBC exploring the research question "What is the role of the public service broadcaster?" We wanted to understand audience attitudes towards the BBC, and how this impacted their consumption of political news online and subsequent political engagement. Participants were asked to write an open-ended diary entry on three general themes - news consumption, news-seeking and sharing behaviour, and social media habits - over 6 weeks. Every week, participants were provided sent an email link, which led them to the diary portal. They were provided with a short list of guiding questions pertaining to each theme, giving them some idea of what we wanted them to comment and reflect on. This diary study was implemented alongside a short political knowledge test and a few survey questions.

A method like this is advantageous as it brings to the surface what motivates and influences individuals' internal thought process, and the subsequent actions they choose to take, if any. This gathered data on opinion that was not curtailed by the usual boundaries of a mass survey or interview. The diary nature of data collection allowed participants to offer expansive answers if they desired, and were not confined to one interview Unlike mass surveys, respondents were able to share their answers without the confines of 'pre-selected' options that respondents find inaccurate or cannot relate to. The use of diaries also meant we were privy to how their social relations and interactions played a part in their choice and preference development. For example, a number of participants shared how heated Brexit-related discussions in their family meant avoidance of any news discussion, and sometimes further interest in the topic.

In addition to using diaries, the study also sought to integrate different data sources. Recognising that different methods are able to capture distinct insights, we also used survey and behavioural data. This approach allowed us to study not only what people thought, but what they did and how they answered common questions. By integrating these sources, we were able to get richer insights into the significance and meaning of participant attitudes and behaviour.

The behavioural data provided a 'big picture' overview of what participants were doing on the BBC website, including the news topics and articles read, how much time they spent on the website, and if they went on to share those news pieces online. The survey results shed light participant consumption habits and consistency over six weeks, with the meaning and motivations of these were only revealed through their diary entries. The rich detail provided in these entries, together with the other data, not only uncovered habits and actions undertaken, but also presented the phenomenon in as accurate a way as we possibly could, by taking into account the various shades of grey between actions and motivations that are often not obvious to observers at first glance.

This method, of course, also had its limits. The sample was small (N= 121) and thus unrepresentative of all BBC online users. It also did not tell us much about what other media platforms and information audiences were coming into contact with outside of the BBC website. Recognising what we can claim from the data we have collected is important when it comes to applying and discussing our findings, but in particular, looking at a phenomenon in intimate detail can also help refine large-scale research designs. For instance, subjects such as website layout and news format were repeatedly mentioned by our respondents in their diary entries, but were not part of the questions we had originally developed based on existing literature. Such a methodological approach not only provides insight into the phenomenon of study, but can serve to inform the development of future research, particularly mass survey questions, so that scaling up to a representative sample will result in more accurate results. This is key to better public opinion research, especially those carried out longitudinally.

Public opinion is as diverse as the people which make up the public, and thus moving forward, it is important for researchers to put the 'public' in public opinion. The challenges in understanding public opinion beyond a quantitative approach can be mitigated by a qualitative approach that centres around the public. This is increasingly crucial in a time of decreasing survey response rates and reliance on other forms of metrics, while useful, have other flaws. As I have demonstrated with my experience with online media diaries, qualitative approaches that allow the voice of the public to play a central role have a great deal to contribute to understanding attitudes, motivations and aversions. These detailed responses not only enables researchers to have in-depth opinion data, but when used in integration with other larger-scale methods means a robust result that bridges both macro- and micro- level data. The use of a qualitative method that involves direct opinions and views from members of the public also means we are able to design better survey questions, resulting in more accurate public opinion results, which can in turn enhance policymaking and other democratic processes carried out by political representatives.

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POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE PUBLIC

Professor Charles Pattie

Measuring and analysing that strange entity, public opinion, forms the basis of much quantitative political science research. A lot of the methodological apparatus behind that – sampling, survey design, data analysis etc. – is the stuff of innumerable 'methods ' textbooks and courses. As a result, whether we are quantitative researchers or not, we're all broadly familiar with the idea of things like unbiased samples and non-leading questions in quantitative research, and the problems that can easily arise when these desiderata are ignored. So I'm not really going to discuss those here. What I want to do instead is to outline some of the ideas about the nature of 'public opinion' which underpin quantitative research in this area.

Let's start with the 'big one': is there really something we can call 'the public' and does it have independent opinions? (Or, to put it another way, what's the 'political science' take on the argument that 'the public' and 'public opinion' are simply artefacts of the research process, brought into existence only by the questions we ask, and who we ask them of?) A classic 'idealist' position might be that we can't know anything except through our sense-data and mental perceptions of it – and to that extent things only exist in our minds. To which I'd respond: try telling that to a tuberculosis bacterium! If we are unlucky enough to contract TB, it will, untreated, probably make us very ill (and may kill us), whether or not we've any conception of either the disease or its cause. We can't cure ourselves of TB by saying "I've no mental conception of TB, so it can't exist". TB is out there, whether we know it or not – and it killed in vast numbers before any 'modern' conception of what it might be was formed. The disease came first: our understandings of it followed! Without wishing to compare 'the public' or 'public opinion' to a potentially deadly disease, they too are in some form 'out there', whether we have conception of them or not.

This does not mean there is a Roussea-esque 'general will'. Nor does it mean that 'the public' will have clear or coherent views on any issue way are to ask about. The public (i.e. all of us) are plural, diverse and volatile in our opinions, and most of us have coherent views on only a relatively narrow range of issues.

Different people have different opinions and views. They hold some of those views very strongly and others weakly – and on some issues may have no real views at all, either because they are genuinely indifferent or because they have never heard of or thought about the issue. I may care deeply about something which you find trivial and unimportant (or we both might have strong views on the same thing, but our views may dirge radically). And people will change their minds on issues – sometimes over the long term, sometimes very suddenly. There is no settled 'general will'.

But – and here's the thing – how do we know this to be the case? Ironically, much of the key evidence comes from survey-based quantitative studies of public opinion, which repeatedly demonstrate the diversity and volatility of public opinion. Researchers like Philip Converse and John Zaller made their reputations in part by using careful survey research to show that people often hold inconsistent and contradictory opinions – and on some issues have no coherent view at all. I'd call that a triumph of the political science/survey approach! It's through the careful (and repeated) measurement of opinions that we begin to get a sense of which views are firmly held, and by how many people, and which are more ephemeral or less popular (and how this changes over time).

More than that, a well-conducted quantitative approach seeks to uncover patterns and regularities underlying the diversities of opinion. Who thinks what, and why – and why might they change their minds?

To do this, good quantitative research (as with other methodological traditions) starts with theory. It is theory which gives us a first stab at explanation, and which tells us which factors to measure and investigate. But, like most quantitative political scientists, I'm a theory sceptic! There are lots of ingenious and brilliant theories about the political world and about what people think politically out there. But they can't all be right. How are we to choose between them? One route is to choose a theory either because of the elegance of its internal logic or because its political implications fit comfortably with our preferences. That's comforting, but I don't find it intellectually satisfying.

What I'm after are theories which 'work', in the sense that they seem to capture something about the real world – that is, they make predictions which can be verified (or falsified) against empirical evidence. I prefer to work with a range of rival theories purporting to explain the phenomenon I'm studying. I take each of those theories seriously in its own terns, look for testable (i.e. falsifiable) predictions which arise from the logic of each theory, and then go looking for the best measures I can find for the concepts on which the theory depends and which supposedly drive those testable predictions. I then analyse the data I obtain to see which, if any, of my theories is supported by the empirical evidence. If that means a theory I am attracted to falls by the wayside for lack of clear evidence, then so be it: I've learned something. Similarly, if a theory I find personally uncomfortable does gain support from the evidence, I've learned something too. But in both cases it is the empirical evidence – imperfect though it is – which is the arbiter of a theory's adequacy as an explanation of the world. By looking at multiple theories side by side, and by examining the best data I can find for each theory, I try as hard as I can to avoid running favourites or cherry-picking results to fit my own predilections.

Nor do I expect my findings to stand for all time. Like most quantitative political scientists, I am not primarily in search of universal, invariant, deterministic laws of political behaviour (the idea that this is the prime motivator of quantitative political science owes more to rather hackneyed textbook clichés than to actual quantitative political science). Generally, we are comfortable with the idea of (at the strongest) probabilistic explanations (how LIKELY is something) which may be time-limited in their operation and may change over time as people change. Take one example. I am pretty sure that, had modern survey techniques been available to researchers in the nineteenth century, three would have been a strong association between being a graduate of an English university and holding conservative and High Anglican views. Now, university graduates tend to be relatively secular and liberal in their outlooks (Gladstone, remember, lost his Oxford University seat in 1865 in part because of his advocacy of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and in part because he increasingly leaned to the Liberals and away front he Conservatives). But the trick is to know when things stay the same, and to know when they change; to know when something is a near-dead cert, and when it is actually rather rare and unusual.

To do that, we need to measure (among other things) opinions, and their correlations with underlying social factors, repeatedly. By doing so, we can see when things change and when they do not. We can see what looks stable from what seems volatile. Yes, we could illustrate the point by carrying out in-depth qualitative interviews over time (and this would be a valuable exercise in its own right). But it would also be open to the challenge that 'well, the people you talked to were unusual in some way'. Survey methods, if well done, get round this by giving a stronger idea of the range of opinions, and the reasons underlying that range.

What of the argument that 'public opinion' is constructed by the questions we ask people, not by the views held by the people we ask? Well, undoubtedly, it is possible to influence and to some extent direct what people say they think about an issue. We can even explore, using quantitative approaches, how opinions (and behaviours) might change under particular sorts of influence. The rapid expansion in the use of field experiments (and even lab experiments) in political science over recent years has been of considerable value here. By randomly varying who is exposed to which hypothesised influences, we can get a stronger sense of whether those posited influences are really influential at all.

But does that mean that all expressed opinions in surveys are merely artefacts of the research process? Almost certainly not. We know (from experiments and surveys) that people are in general more likely to change their minds or be influenced in their expressed views on issues which they know little about and are not do not have strong views on. The stronger their view on an issue, the less malleable their view is. No surprise, perhaps, but it does strongly suggest that opinions are not mere artefacts.

Can we measure 'public opinion' with complete accuracy? Simple answer: no! There are inescapable problems of measurement error, imprecise question wording, and so on. And the 'schoolkid error' in quantitative political science is to ask a survey question eliciting views on some arcane or esoteric policy option. "How strongly do you agree or disagree with the government's policy on futures derivatives?" might be a case in point: why on earth would most people even know what such a question was about, let alone have any coherent or thought-out view on it? It's just too esoteric.

In other words, don't expect miracles, wither from the survey method, or from members of the public. People lead busy and intricate lives and don't have the time or energy to invest in following every twist and turn of politics in minute detail. The fault here lies with the researcher, not with the method itself (and, indeed, the method, if applied properly, will quickly reveal just what a daft question this was to ask in the first place (repeat questioning would reveal, no doubt, very volatile views, high proportions of 'don't know' answers and so on).

None of this is easy. Measurement is tough – especially with something as intangible as opinion. But it is possible, as long as we are careful, thorough, and don't ask the impossible both of our methods and of the public we study. Does this mean this is the only path to truth? Absolutely not. Does it mean that quantitative and qualitative methods are incompatible? I genuinely don't think they are – though we need to pay careful attention to what each can and cannot reveal.

We do not always get it right. Sometimes we get it spectacularly wrong. But that's research for you. Don't expect 'holy grail' methodologies which will always deliver 'the truth'. Keep an open mind. Be sceptical. Be prepared to learn, to look at things from different angles, to try new approaches, to test old ideas against new data, to test new ideas against old data – but be prepared to keep on keeping on. The key, I think, is to always ask interesting questions – and to never be afraid to ask them again, just to make sure. For the classicists out there, 'ars longa, vita brevis'. Or, if you prefer the pessimistic humour of Samuiel Beckett (a sceptic if ever there was one), "Ever tried? Ever failed? No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better!"

Professor Charles Pattie is a Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield. His research focuses on elections and voting, with particular emphasis on the role of context in voters' and parties' decision-making. He has published widely on electoral systems, political campaigning, economic voting, the neighbourhood effect, and political participation.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

How Do We Study the Public? Is the second in The Crick Centre's seminar series of think pieces on studying the public. Far from reifying quantitative methodologies, all three contributors clearly urge caution about methodological determinism, and have instead acknowledged the need to reflect on the kind of knowledge being sought. Whilst generalisable findings are undeniably useful, predefined survey questions were often seen to miss important nuances in people's views and unable to capture the social construction of people's opinions (in a way focus groups, for example, can). This suggests the need to think more widely about what we want to know when we study the public.

Thinking once again about Workshop 1 where we discussed the idea of the public and who they are, it therefore appears that there is value in not conceptualising the public as a predefined object that can be studied to generate fixed knowledge claims. Rather, the public is a fluid idea that can be studied using a variety of methodologies, and that can produce different and often unexpected insights. To end off, we pose some questions for further debate:

- How as researchers can we (and should we) ensure that questions accurately reflect the public and the changes they experience over time?
- How does the public want their opinion captured?
- How important is it to overcome methodological challenges in order to understand non-public opinions?

We hope this will encourage others to think more critically about their approaches to investigating the public, as well as engage in continual deliberation about innovative methods.

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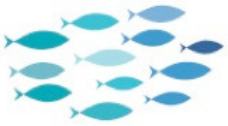

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