

# HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT THE PUBLIC THINK?

DR NIKKI SOO

CHARLIE HEYWOOD-HEATH

DR ALEXANDRA ANDERSON



## 02

## INTRODUCTION

The difficulties in knowing what the public wants and thinks is a conundrum that is faced by politicians, policymakers, activists, and academics. These political actors understand and study the public in very different ways, ranging from nationally representative surveys to studies of small, localised groups. Acknowledging these varying perspectives matters because it is common for references to ‘the public’ and subsequently public opinion, to be used when demonstrating the legitimacy of conflicting views. The implications of this often results in varying differences of public opinion applied by political actors, and affects the subsequent policies that are formed.

Within scholarly work we found a longstanding interest in the conceptualisation of public opinion in relation to polling, but no clarity about how actors within the political system understand and apply it in practice. Contestations over who belongs to this seemingly ever-changing group is widespread (Blumer, 1948; Burstein, 2003; McGregor, 2019). If political actors seek to represent the public, there is a need to explore how public opinion is understood by different groups of political actors.

To address this, our study posed the following research questions:

1. How do political actors at different levels understand public opinion?
2. Why does political opinion matter to political actors?
3. Does the use of social media change the way public opinion is measured?

This project is part of an ongoing strand of research, ‘Studying the Public’, carried out by the Crick Centre, where we tackle what the public means and methods used to study it. The following report first explores how public opinion emerged as a concept and its role in democracy before delving into our research. We then discuss how public opinion is viewed differently by distinct political actors, how this shaped our research study, and what we found during our investigation. At the end of the report we discuss the significance of these findings and distill a few questions for future research and stimulate dialogue and conclude with a reading list of papers we found during our discussion.

## 03

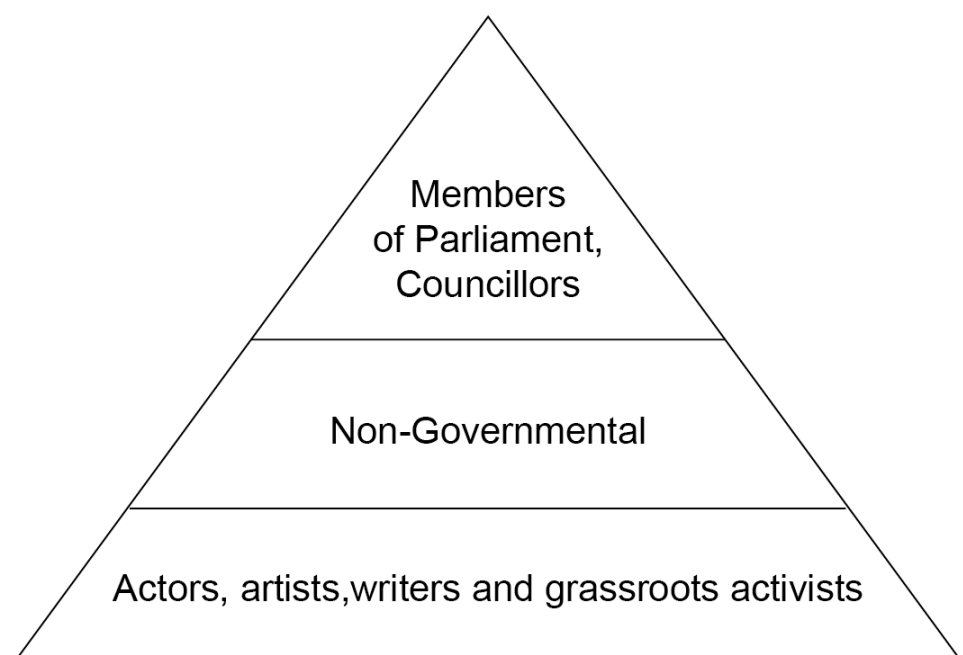
## HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC

Historically, public opinion has played an important role in the political process. In the eighteenth century, for example, the nature of the relationship between the public and political actors was led by the important role of public opinion due to the relatively small electorate. The ‘public sphere’ emerged in this period, a space ‘that functioned in the political realm [that] arose first in Great Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century’ (Habermas 2015; 1962). The ‘public sphere’, and therefore public opinion, were able to flourish due to various developments in public spaces and action that included salons, rioting, advancements in print and the pervasiveness of coffee houses that ultimately promoted growth in the public discussion and representation of politics. Coffee houses, specifically, were initially created as a space where any man, of any social standing, could gather to discuss public affairs (Sennet 2003;1974). Emerging in the mid seventeenth-century, there were an estimated 550 coffee houses in London a hundred years later (Inwood 1998). The voice of the greater public also made itself heard in numbers, and a common method of effective plebeian politics were large crowd demonstrations, which encompassed the riot. This has been termed as ‘the politics of the crowd’ by T.H. Dickinson (1995) and included the Gordon Riots of 1780 with an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 participants (Haywood, Seed 2012). The eighteenth century demonstrates the value and impact of public opinion and its central role in influencing politics, and the period reveals how political voice can be achieved by means other than voting.

## 04

## HOW WE INVESTIGATED PUBLIC OPINION

In studies of political opinion, varying levels of power, status and influence are found in political actors.. Since the public is not a homogenous population, we applied the same logic to identify different groups of political actors who examine and use public opinion. Our study explores the perspective of various political actors and how they generally understand the public and public opinion. We were also keen to explore the perceived importance of public opinion, and how it may subsequently inform the decisions political actors make and how it may influence their political opinions and actions (Quinn-Patton, 2001).



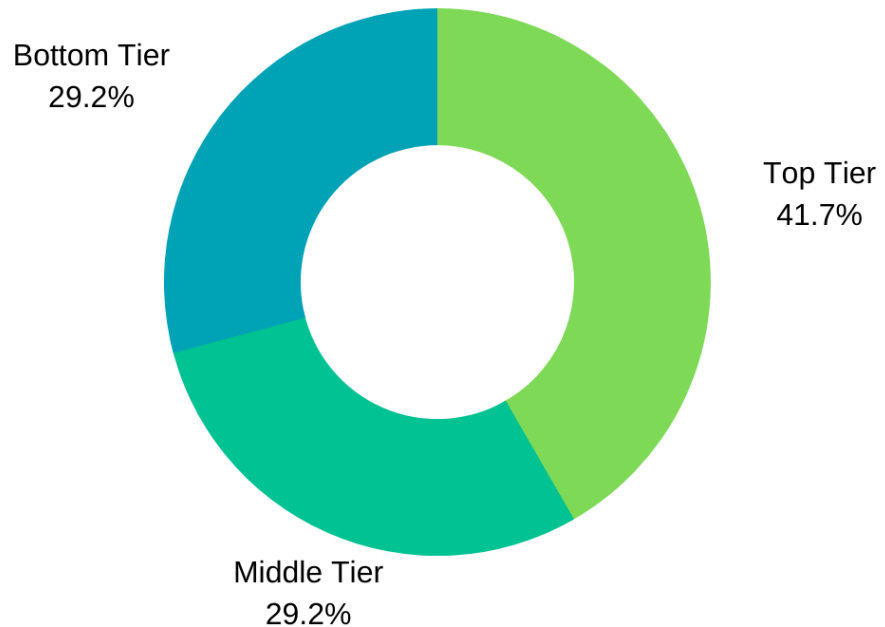
*Diagram 1: Three Tiers of Political Actors*

# 05

Acknowledging this neglect, we approached sampling by identifying similarities and differences between political actors. Based on this, we identified three tiers whose difference is characterised by their unique relationship with the public (see Diagram 1). The rationale for these tiers are as follows:

1. **Top Tier** - Those who are formally elected to serve and represent the public, as it is these political actors whose interpretations of the public inform decision-making on behalf of the public.
2. **Middle Tier** - those who are a part of an established organisation whose role includes producing and promoting public opinion in order to feed this into their work.
3. **Bottom Tier** - Members of the public who try to encapsulate public opinion via their own work. These are individuals who attempt to construct a political narrative through their own activism and interpretations.

We decided on using semi-structured interviews as this allowed nuances to emerge with a degree of flexibility. Using these three groups as a guideline we identified potential interview participants around London and the Yorkshire region (based on our geographical location) that fell into these categories and fulfilled the criteria of either using or developing public opinion information.



*Diagram 2: Participant Sample Breakdown*

We broadened our sample through snowballing from our initial participants to include interviewees across the UK. In total, we contacted 86 potential participants, with 24 of them agreeing to be interviewed, thus forming our sample. The 24 participants ranged from Members of Parliament, Lords, councillors, polling experts, researchers, journalists, to activists. The breakdown of our sample can be seen in Diagram 2.

Whilst the size of our samples does not allow us to draw generalised conclusions, it does provide insights and highlight questions about practices and attitudes towards public opinion.

## 07

## OUR FINDINGS

Across the three tiers of political actors, we found a keen inclination towards seeking out the public's views in relation to their various roles in the political environment, emphasising the importance of making sure the public's voice was integrated in their work. However, we found stark differences between the three tiers, such as: -

- The application of public opinion in practice
- A consensus that the public does not signify the majority, and minority views often play just as important a role in policy-making.
- A preference for traditional methods of gathering public opinion, despite the increasing use of digital platforms such as Twitter which allow the public an outlet to share their thoughts.

**We discuss our three main findings in response to our three research questions as follows:**

- **Differences across tiers in applying public opinion**
- **Value in qualitative opinion**
- **Preference for sources apart from social media**

## 08

## DIFFERENCES ACROSS TIERS IN APPLYING PUBLIC OPINION

Across the three tiers of political actors we observed differences in the way they sought out public opinion and more obviously, the application of public opinion. Those in the top tier, as political representatives, emphasised the importance of seeking out public opinion in order to responsibly carry out their duties. The difficulty in representing a large and variegated population emerged quickly in our interview findings.

Most top tier political actors recognised that a majoritarian view of public opinion may only reflect the portion of society with the loudest voices, and not those who may need the most help or representation. Minority voices and the challenges they face can often go unheard. To illustrate, the following MP explains the need to balance between the majority and minority:

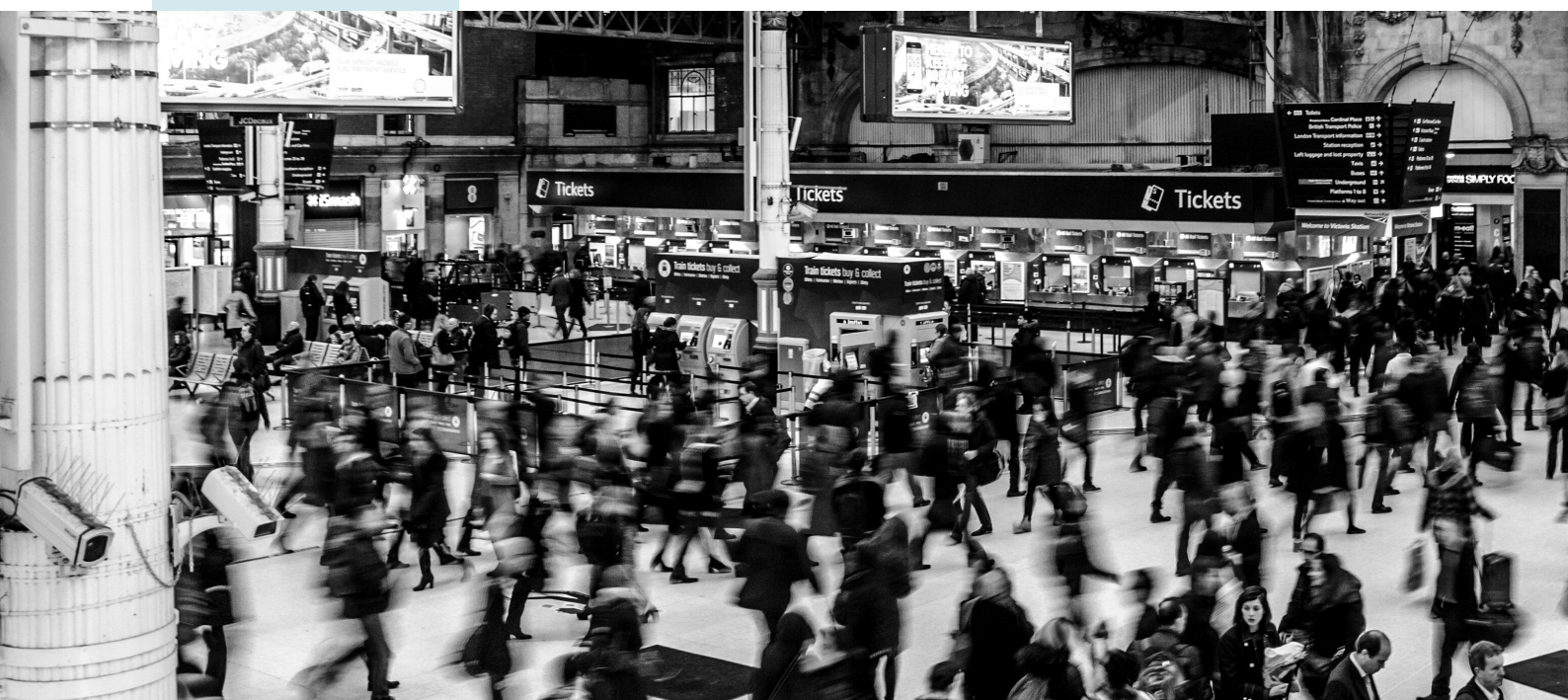
*“As an elected representative you have to form a view of majority and minority view. You have to see if it's a legitimate interest because there's minority views who don't agree with a multicultural society which would not be a legitimate interest from our view... We bring our set of perspectives and our political views, we then want to balance with those people we represent.”*



## 09

Ensuring majority and minority opinions are heard can also result in tensions during policymaking. In recognising that public opinion does not always dictate decision-making, those in the top tier referenced using public opinion as a good starting point to gauge popular political issues amongst their voters.

When politicians did choose to include public opinion data, knowing when and what to include when integrating public opinion into decision-making mattered. Rather than only adhering to polling, it was necessary to use them alongside other types of research and understanding of the issue to inform decision making.



## 10

## VALUE OF QUALITATIVE OPINION

Across all tiers, it was apparent that qualitative methods were key for discovering public opinion. As the following polling expert shares:

*“They always find stories valuable because it’s not hard to make decisions about numbers... or throw facts and stats... but numbers are not individuals... if people really present a story it helps them [local authorities] see the worth of the money.”*

This highlights that political actors’ methods for discovering public opinion is more diverse than that presented. Across the literature, there is a focus on opinion polling (Bennett and Entman, 2005; Bourdieu, 1972; Blumer, 1948) but our interviews indicate that there is a wider range of methods used to gauge public opinion.

Although quantitative methods were still used to gather large volumes of opinion data, when political actors wanted to look deeper into an issue it was viewed that qualitative methods were helpful as deliberative tools. The top and middle tiers, in particular, believed that to gain informed opinion deliberative methods such as citizens assemblies or focus groups could help people debate and discuss their thoughts.

*“If you do regular polling, and you look at percentages, that gives people’s gut instinct on a topic. It doesn’t give you the detail of what the reasons are behind that.”*

Just like the literature, it was clear that political actors also recognised that there were limits to quantitative methods and use qualitative methods to compensate for this.

# 11 PREFERENCE FOR SOURCES APART FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

Across the political actors we interviewed, there was a common recognition that there are multiple sources which can at times conflict and present different pictures of public opinion. In short, political actors preferred face-to-face sources of public opinion over polling where possible, but recognised that time, budget and physical constraints made it challenging. Whether that be canvassing constituents, holding discussions with organisations or spending time within communities; all three tiers believed that the most reliable and valued source is found through directly speaking to people.

*“There is obviously a hierarchy to some extent, and face to face testimony is usually more representative in my view.”*

Recent research suggests social media and other digital tools can offer new platforms for engaging with political actors, disrupting traditional power relationships and subsequent understanding of political opinion (McGregor, 2019; Loader et al, 2016; Loader et al, 2014). According to our interviewees, this source of public opinion did help engage with marginalised and previously agnostic members of the public, such as young people, but our sample recognised that the views posted online did not represent all members of the public.

*“It definitely has a space in terms of allowing people that would never take part in a physical face to face environment or engagement opportunity.”*

We found that social media is recognised as only capturing one aspect of society and political actors of all tiers use these platforms carefully. As an organ, it offers insight into the views of young people and other marginalised groups but it has not revolutionised how political actors understand or make decisions on behalf of the public.

## 12

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we have discovered in our exploration, political actors across all tiers believe there is more nuance to the public and that acting in the interests of the public may occasionally mean overriding the wishes of the majority. Importantly, our paper sheds light on how the perspective of political actors themselves need to be considered in order to deepen the knowledge of how public opinion is understood and used in practice. By identifying a hierarchy amongst political actors and grouping them into three distinct tiers, this study has revealed that political actors differ in the way they conceptualise 'who' the public is and how they apply public opinion to their work.

In presenting this hierarchy of political actors, this study shows that it is not only important to consider how the public interact with political actors but also how political actors interact with each other. These varying levels of interaction are significant because they help develop an understanding of how the public may come to appear in the decisions and actions of the political elite. Although the public might not always interact directly with top tier political actors, they may still have influence through their engagement with other tiers who represent them on their behalf. Recognising the nuances that manifest within the relationship between the public and the political elite through the three tiers reinforces further the importance of studying this field of politics.

# 13

Based on our exploratory findings, we have a number of suggestions for further research.

- It would be useful to examine how political actors across various tiers relate to one another. This research would not only impact our understanding of public opinion, but also help add clarity to how the public interacts with politics, and how politicians interact with the public. The three-tiered approach could offer further insight into how public opinion is expressed through the bottom up to the political elites, and how its use then affects the tiers from top to bottom.
- Further work could be done on how the relationship between the political actors from the middle and bottom tiers can be conducted, especially in their role as conduits of public opinion to the top tier.
- Our findings revealed a variety of views political actors hold when it comes to sources of opinion. An area of future research could investigate if these findings relate to their actual behaviour, as well as looking further into which sources are cited and in which context.

# 14

In conclusion, our results advance academic knowledge on how public opinion is being understood amongst different political actors in the political system. Importantly, our paper sheds light on how the perspective of political actors themselves need to be considered in order to deepen the knowledge of how public opinion is understood and used in practice. By identifying a hierarchy amongst political actors and grouping them into three distinct tiers, this study has revealed that political actors differ in the way they conceptualise 'who' the public is and how they apply public opinion to their work. Furthermore, within a chaotic political environment such as Brexit, our exploratory findings could help highlight a possibly explanation as to why so many people are unsatisfied with elites claiming to listen and represent the people.

## 15

## READING LIST

**Here is a selection of our references you might find useful.**

Anstead, N., O'Loughlin, B. (2015) Social Media Analysis and Public Opinion: The 2010 UK General Election, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 20, International Communication Association.

Bennett, L., Entman, R. (2005) Mediated Politics, Communication in the Future of Democracy, Cambridge University Press: New York.

Blumer, H. (1948) Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling, American Sociological Review. 13 (5), American Sociological Association, p.544.

Dickinson, T.H. (1994) The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Macmillan: Basingstoke.

Dommett, K., Temple, L. (2017) Digital Campaigning: The Rise of Facebook and Satellite Campaigns, Britain Votes, 189-202, Hansard Society, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

McGregor, S. (2019) Social Media as Public Opinion: How Journalists Use Social Media to Represent Public Opinion, Journalism, Sage Publications: London, p.1.

Sennet, Richard (2003;1974). The Fall of Public Man, Penguin: London  
Schober,

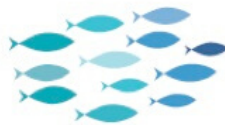
M., Pasek, J., Guggenheim, L., Lampe, C., Conrad, F. (2016) Social Media Analyses for Social Measurement, Public Opinionary Quarterly, 80 (1), Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Zaller, R. (1992) The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.





The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.



The Crick Centre  
Understanding Politics



The Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics  
The University of Sheffield  
Elmfield Building  
Northumberland Road  
Sheffield S10 2TU, UK



[www.sheffield.ac.uk/crickcentre](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/crickcentre)



@crickcentre