# INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ON U. S. GOVERNMENT

2 April 1947

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GENERAL McKINLEY:

Gentlemen, this afternoon we have with us Mr. William A. Lydgate, who attended the University of Hawaii in 1926 and 1927 and graduated from Yale in 1931.

He is an editor and an analyst. For a number of years he was a writer for TIME Magazine. He became editor of The American Institute of Public Opinion, that is, the Gallup Poll, in 1935. He still holds that position.

Mr. Lydgate has been a lecturer on public opinion since 1940. This afternoon he will address us on "Influence of Public Opinion Polls on U. S. Government." I take extreme pleasure in introducing to you Mr. William A. Lydgate.

(Applause)

MR. LYDGATE:

General McKinley and friends: I would like to start by thanking General McKinley for his very short and snappy introduction of me. As a speaker, I usually hate to listen to long, drawn-out, if flattering, introductions.

I understand you either have had or will have a talk on the purely technical side of the conducting of public opinion surveys. So I won't try to go into that in detail except to leave with you just one major thought about the technique of opinion sampling. The most common question which we hear, as poll-takers, from critics and friends, is: "I wish you would explain to me why I have never been polled by the Gallup Poll." Sometimes they say, "I have never heard of anybody who has ever heard of anybody else who has ever gotten a ballot or been questioned." They naturally want to know what is the mystery behind all of this. They want to know how many people are polled; who are they; where are they; and just how these polls are taken.

Even if we were to poll ten thousand people a week, it would take us one hundred fifty-four years to get around just once to the total voting population of the United States! Our statistical experts have estimated that because of the enormous size of the country, any one individual's chance of being polled in any one of these polls is about as good as your chance of being struck by lightning. Once, I remember

making that point in a talk and someone in the audience jumped up from the rear of the room and said, "But, Mr. Lydgate, I have been struck by lightning but I've never been polled." (Laughter)

Seriously, though, the art or science of opinion measurement does not lie in the size of a poll. It is a common fallacy to suppose that the bigger a poll is, the more accurate it is. That is not the case at all.

I think the best way to illustrate the point is to recall the fate of the old LITERARY DIGEST Poll. Some of you, I am sure, will remember the old LITERARY DIGEST. In 1936, when Roosevelt and Landon were campaigning for the presidential election, the DIGEST sent out ten million ballots, an enormous number of ballots, a whole warehouse full of them. The ballots were filled out by the voters of the country. When the avalanche came back, the results were tabulated, and the DIGEST solemnly announced that Landon was going to win, which turned out to be, well, something of an overstatement.

It is a beautiful illustration of the point that the size of a poll has little to do with its accuracy. The DIGEST went wrong because they picked their names from telephone books and from lists of automobile owners, private passenger-car owners. Not a bad idea for a poll except that one-third of the families of this country have no telephone and no automobile. Their names do not appear in phone books or on auto lists. It so happened that in 1936 the people without phones or autos (usually found in the lower one-third) were precisely the people that had the strongest pro-Democratic, pro-Roosevelt, pro-New Deal leanings. So the DIGEST was missing a very important segment of the population by confining their poll to the upper and upper-middle families, where you find the greatest concentration of telephones and autos. They went wrong because of the fatal flaw of a nonrepresentative sample.

In any critique or analysis of public opinion which you gentlemen will be called upon at any time in your career to make, the thing to remember is to find out how representative the sample is. That is much more important than the question of how many ballots were taken.

In modern opinion polling, the sampling is usually done by means of interviews and not by ballots sent through the mail. We maintain a staff of about a thousand people throughout the country; other poll-takers have several hundred at least. They go around questioning face-to-face a cross-section of the voters in their communities. Each of these field reporters has a sheaf of ballots on which there are perhaps ten or eleven questions dealing with public issues. The ballot is read to the voter and the opinion on each question is recorded, or the "no opinion," as the case may be. Often, the "no opinion" is just as important to find out as the opinion itself. Then the ballots are

tabulated and sent in. Reports are made to a group of daily newspapers, who are the sponsors or underwriters of this continuous measurement of public sentiment.

The point to which I would like to address myself today is the matter of the possible influence of public opinion polls on the United States Government.

I would like to start by making it very plain that we are not out to influence anybody. We are reporters. Our purpose is not to bring about anything, not to foster any cause, no matter how worthy it may be. Our task, as we conceive it, is to try to find out, as accurately as humanly possible, what public opinion is and to report those facts. What is done about those facts is the function of organizations other than our own. But I do think that the facts which are discovered and revealed about public opinion do have some influence on legislative and administrative processes.

Now is that good or is it bad? Well, your opinion on that is as good as anybody's. My personal view is that if public opinion has no influence on government, then you do not have a democracy. Maybe it is desirable to have government run simply by experts without reference to the masses. If you want that kind of a government, well and good; but don't call it democracy. Government by experts without relation to public opinion is more like fascism. Eventually, you get down to a small group of experts and ultimately down to one expert as, in the case of Germany, Adolph Hitler, who "experted" himself out of existence. In the democratic process public opinion is a factor; it is not the only factor, heaven knows, but it is a major factor.

The problem instantly arises: How do you determine public opinion? How do you find out what the sentiment of the people is? It would seem to me to be the very essence of logic that in a government "by the consent of the governed" there must be some steady communication between the elected representatives and the people whom they are supposed to represent.

In plainer words, Lincoln once said, "What I want to get done is what the people desire to have done. The question for me is how to find that out, exactly."

Lord Bryce, the author of "The American Commonwealth," has a rather penetrating paragraph in his other book, "Modern Democracies," in which he talks about the force of public opinion. He says:

> "In saying that public opinion is the real ruler of America, I mean that there exists a judgment and sentiment of the whole Nation which is imperfectly expressed through its representative legislatures, is not to be measured by an analysis of votes cast at elections, is not easily gathered

from the most diligent study of the press, but is nevertheless a real force, impalpable as the wind, yet a force which all are trying to discover and nearly all to obey."

Just because it is "impalpable," some people dismiss public opinion as something not very relevant, not very important. But I think a study of the history of our country will show that the people, in the long run, get their way. They may not get their way immediately, it may take years, but when you come to a final striking of the balance, public opinion does get its way. It puts governments in and out of office; it makes and breaks heroes; it starts and stops wars; it has a potent force on the conduct of our government.

Starting from that general premise, let's ask ourselves some questions about public opinion measurement. A common question which comes up is, Can public opinion polls do anything to thwart the influence of pressure groups on legislation?

One of the big problems of democracy is the problem of organized pressure groups. They bring a great pressure of power to bear on Congressional bodies, claiming to represent the people. We had a great many pressure groups prior to Pearl Harbor, before we got into the war. There are always pressure groups, but that seemed to be, particularly, a time when they flourished.

The founders of this country often talked in their debates about the tyranny of the majority. I think, more realistically, we should speak of the tyranny of the minority. I can think of many instances when the progress of the country was sadly limited by the power of the organized minority. While it is true that certain minorities have advanced human thought, and have taken a front position in intellectual and cultural leadership, generally speaking the organized minorities that try to influence government have, I think, slowed up the process of democracy.

In modern times, when you haven't the luxury of being able to wait long before taking action to meet a problem, it is becoming increasingly important to know the sentiments of the whole people rather than to judge entirely by the speeches from minority groups.

As an example, when the Burke-Wadsworth Selective Service Bill was being debated in Congress, in 1940, fourteen Senators out of the ninety-six received a total of thirty thousand letters. An analysis was made of the mail received by these fourteen Senators. It was found that out of those thirty thousand letters, nine to one were against the Burke-Wadsworth Selective Service Bill. Had that been taken as an index of public sentiment, Congress would have gone very slowly about passing the Selective Service Act.

Here was a piece of evidence which seemed overwhelming--nine to one! But when surveys of the opinion of the whole country were taken, on a scientific sampling basis, the results showed 68 percent in favor of the bill, 27 percent opposed, and five percent "no opinion." What was happening here was that the 27 percent opposed to the draft were the ones writing nine out of every ten letters that went to Congress.

I think one of the functions and one of the services that opinion measurement can render is the testing of the exact extent of pressure-group influence and a measurement of just how much the pressure group represents. There are other examples along the same line but I haven't time to go into them in detail. However, I think the general conclusion can be sustained that the knowledge of public opinion hastened the adoption of the Selective Service draft.

Another question which people often ask about opinion measurement is this: Won't the country suffer when its leaders begin to pay a lot of attention to public opinion polls? That is, won't we have a situation in which the leaders become mere rubber-stamps, in which they act like puppets and there is a slavish worship of public opinion?

Well, I am not particularly afraid of that kind of a situation. If you are afraid of that, it is because you fear public opinion. It is because you feel public opinion is stupid or unenlightened. That is a conclusion which I do not happen to share. I think their is abundant evidence in the files of opinion-survey organizations to sustain the general conclusion, that if things were left up to the public for a decision, you would not have any worse government than you have when you do not follow the public sentiment; in fact, you would have a better government. If this country had been run by pure plebiscite in the last ten years--I am not advocating that it should have been, but I am saying if it had been--we would not have been any worse off.

We have found in our work that the people have a way of being ahead of their government; they are ahead of their political leaders and very far ahead of Congress. Time after time we have found that what happens is this: A public issue comes to the fore; there is discussion and debate; we begin to study sentiment and find it commencing to crystallize. Finally, a majority emerges from the surveys. The majority says, "We ought to take such-and-such an action about that problem." Then public opinion has to mark time and wait for Congress to catch up.

Sometimes Congress catches up rapidly but sometimes it is very, very slow. I am thinking, for example, of the fact that as early as 1935 we were finding, in a series of surveys, a very substantial majority of the people in the country in favor of building a bigger army, a bigger navy, and a bigger air force. The people looked at

Hitler and said, "We don't like the looks of that man. We don't want to start a war with him." (The people of democracies never want to start wars). "But," they said, "we can't tell what he's going to do. The prudent course would be to look to our defenses."

Note that in the same period, during the Nineteen-thirties, we found a substantial majority of the people in favor of paying higher taxes in order to make an expansion of the army, navy and air forces possible. You gentlemen are familiar, I am sure, with the fact that the Government was slow to translate that sentiment of the common people into action. Congress did get around to enlarging the Army and Navy, but it was too little and much too late. We paid for the fatal dalay with a full year of humiliating defeats in the Pacific. We were thrown out of the Philippines; we were thrown out of Corregidor.

It is unfair and incorrect to say, "Oh, well, the public wouldn't have stood for enlarging the army, navy and air forces before Pearl Harbor." That is not correct. The evidence is overwhelming that what you had here was a very widespread sentiment among the people; they were perfectly willing to see a big expansion of the Army and Navy. But it was a case where a small group of very vociferous people, who cried "war mongering," was able to intimidate and scare enough Congressmen to slow down the process of rearmament. I think here is a case where the man in the street showed a lot more common sense about rearmament than the average Congressman did.

I have already cited the fact that the public was ahead of the Congress on the Selective Service Bill, having favored it at least five months before Congress got around to adopting it.

We found the people were nine months ahead of Congress on lifting the embargo provisions of the Neutrality Act in 1939.

We also found the people at least two years ahead of the Treasury Department in their willingness to see a broadening of the income-tax base so that more low-income families would pay for the cost of defense and war.

There are many other instances. In 1938, three years prior to Pearl Harbor, we found three voters out of every four saying, "Let's stop the shipment of oil, gasoline, and scrap-metal to Japan."

I do not think it is fair to dismiss the people, the masses, as a collection of boobs. As you know, the cynical and fashionable theory of the 1920's and 1930's was that the common people are pretty stupid. They had a mental age of--what was it?--thirteen. They were considered slightly-educated morons. It was fashionable to belittle the masses. Mencken used to speak in his writings about "boobocracy." There was nothing but contempt. It was thought that you could pull the people around by the nose with propaganda. The whole theory found its ultimate flowering

in the writings of Hitler, who had the utmost contempt for the "stupid masses." He spoke of them as "ballot cattle."

It is high time the old theories were pretty drastically revised. We have some facts now, a whole mountain of facts, which show how the people have reacted to these big issues in the last ten years. They show a lot of pretty good, solid horse-sense on the part of the majority.

Heaven knows there are some sections of society that do not do much thinking; we know that. The American people are not as well-informed as they should be. But the important thing is that if you give the people the facts the majority will generally come to a sensible conclusion about what to do.

The third question which comes up in opinion-polling work is this: Will public opinion polls voice the views of the inarticulate majority? The answer, I think, is yes; that is their function. A word, perhaps, is needed here about the behavior of majority and minority groups.

About two years ago we had a very extensive correspondence with General Marshall, who was then the Chief of Staff, about the whole matter of public reaction toward demobilization and toward peacetime military training. He was quite worried. He said the Army was hearing from the people who were opposed to peacetime training but they did not hear from the people who were in favor of it.

In the course of the correspondence we tried to point out a fact which I think is well to bear in mind: You will never hear from the people who are willing to sacrifice. You will never hear in the same terms, and in the same intensity, as you will from the people who are not willing to sacrifice. For example, you would not expect people to write to the Treasury Department and say, "Please, Mister, tax me some more." The Treasury Department would only hear from the people who say, "For heaven's sake, stop taxing me. I can't stand it any more."

The War Department, to take another example, would never hear from mothers saying, "Please, Mister, draft my son." It will hear from the mothers who say, "Don't you dare draft my little boy!"

But let's not conclude that just because the majority don't beat their breasts they are unwilling to accept a sacrifice when called upon to make it. It is naive and unrealistic to suppose that you are ever going to hear from the majority who are willing to make a sacrifice.

I am not at all worried about public opinion when it comes to peacetime military training. I think the thing to worry about is Congress. Congress hears continually from the people who are opposed.

They yell loudly; they bring pressure to bear. But when you go out among the people you will find, as we have in fourteen surveys covering three years, there has never been less than 60 percent of the people in favor of peacetime military training of all able-bodied young men. The current figure, about two or three weeks ago is more than 70 percent in favor.

The people give two reasons for favoring peacetime training: One, they are afraid of being caught the way we were in 1941 when this war hit us. They remember the humiliating defeats, when we did not have enough men or enough arms. They do not want that to happen again.

And, second, most American parents feel that a year in the Army is "good discipline" for the young men. The young men may not entirely agree with that point of view, but the parents think it is a good thing for their sons.

So opinion measurement can be useful in reflecting the majority sentiment which is not often reflected in any other way, such as letter writing, petitioning, holding public rallies, or making speeches.

Another question which comes up is, How can polls aid or build up the processes of democracy? I think there are two ways in which that is possible. One is, as I have indicated, by measuring the claims of pressure groups; and the second is by defining mandates.

One of the drawbacks of democracy is that when an election is over it is very difficult to figure out just what the public wanted to say when it went to the polls and voted. In the presidential election, for example, you have two candidates; the public is asked to choose between the two. It may be that all they are saying is they like a man named Smith better than they like a man named Jones. It does not necessarily mean that in electing Smith they are endorsing all of his program. Nor does it mean that by rejecting Jones they are rejecting what he stood for.

It is exceedingly difficult to figure out the mandate of elections. When Hoover ran against Al Smith in 1928, Hoover stood on what people interpreted to be, a dry, that is a prohibition, platform. Al Smith was strong for repeal of Prohibition. Many politicians concluded that Hoover's election was a mandate from the American people to continue prohibition. Perhaps that was not the case at all. Perhaps the people just thought Herbert Hoover would do a better job as President than Al Smith. There were many other factors besides Prohibition in the situation.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was reelected in 1936 with an enormous majority, was that a mandate for him to try to change the Supreme Court? He came back from that election feeling the flush of victory

and within a few months announced his plan to change the Supreme Court. He had just been elected by the second highest popular percentage of any President since Washington. Yet surveys found that the people were not in favor of the Supreme Court plan.

The mandate last November, in the Congressional elections, proved puzzling to some. Many of our Republican Senators and Representatives who were elected to office have apparently interpreted the election last November as a mandate to reduce Government spending; to cut the budget. Is that ture? Is that what the people had in mind?

Well we know that, on one score at least, it was not what the people had in mind. I am referring to the budget of the armed forces. When a survey was made recently on the issue of whether the government should reduce the figure which President Truman issued in his budget (eleven and a half billion, approximately) for the armed forces, we found 60 percent of the voters of the country expressed opposition to any reduction of that military and naval budget; 34 percent wanted it cut, and 6 percent had no opinion.

So the question immediately is raised, Did the election mean a mandate to cut down the largest item in the budget, namely, military expenses? Incidentally, it is noteworthy that in the last ten years public opinion has been on the side of the Army and Navy in matters of expansion and spending. It was very true in the Thirties, and again we find, in this current poll, more evidence that the Army and Navy can look to public sentiment for support.

There are certain other points on the other side of the ledger when we examine public opinion polls. Are there areas where the views of the people are likely to have little value? Definitely yes. Polls are an instrument, but they do have limited uses. You cannot use a poll for everything, or to solve every problem, particularly on an issue which is very complicated. A complex public problem does not lend itself easily to public opinion polling. The people are well qualified to give opinions about things that affect their own daily lives but are less qualified to give opinions about something in a realm more removed from their own daily lives. For example, the Baruch program of control of atomic energy is something on which it is difficult to poll public sentimant because so few people know about the plan in any detail. About all you can do is to find the general direction of public thinking on a broad basis. It is less satisfactory to try to categorize it on specific points.

In order to get public sentiment on complicated issues, there has been developed recently a new technique of question-asking which is proving rather satisfactory. It is what we call the five-way approach or, in colloquial terms, the five-way stretch. We have a series of five questions that we use in covering a public issue.

The first question is designed to find out how much the person knows about the problem, a question which reads something like this: Have you heard or read about President Truman's proposal for aid to Greece and Turkey? You eliminate the people who say, "Well, no; I haven't been following that. I don't know what it's all about." By the use of that filter you can determine how well informed the public is.

The second of the five questions is, What is your general opinion about this situation? Then you let the voter talk. It is the so-called "open" question in the sense that it does not ask for a definite yes or no. It simply says, "What do you think?" The interviewer takes down the opinions expressed in some detail.

The third part of the five-way approach is to build up a specific proposal, such as, "The President proposes a program of 250 million dollars aid to Greece. Do you think Congress should or should not approve this aid?" You get a definite yes or no or "no opinion" on that. That is how public sentiment would presumably divide if there were an open referendum held on the specific issue on which a decision has to be made.

The fourth part of this five-way questioning is, "Why do you feel that way? What are your reasons?"

And the fifth is, "How strongly do you feel?"

You get, by this method a picture of how much the man knows. You get a picture of his general impression; an indication of how he would vote in a specific referendum on the issue; why he feels that way and how intense his sentiment is. With that technique we are able to cover more and more the highly-complex issues which previously have been very difficult for public opinion polling. We call it the "quintamensional" approach to question design.

I think Lord Bryce well summarized the limitations of public opinion by saying, that "The people, who are the power entitled to say what they want, are less qualified to say how and in what form they are to obtain it. Or, in other words, public opinion can determine ends but is less fit to examine means."

I certainly would not like to leave with you the thought that public opinion, even though it shows a good deal of sound judgment, is infallible. It is not. The American people, I think, have made mistakes; they will make them again. There are certain blind spots in the mass-mind. There is for example the melancholy history of lynchings in the South, of race-hatred, race-bigotry.

Certainly our democracy is far from perfect. But what we know about public thinking revives our faith in the democratic process.

When we started this work twelve years ago, frankly we did not know how we were going to end up. We wondered whether we would not turn into complete cynics. After four or five years of rubbing elbows with the masses, we thought we might grow thoroughly disillusioned about democracy; and came to feel that the people are so stupid and dumb as to be really not worth polling. Actually, our experience has turned out to be just the opposite. We have come away with an entirely new and much more optimistic picture about democracy. It is a faith that is based not on some mystical, metaphysical theory out of textbooks, but it is a faith based on mountains of statistics. I invite you to sit down some day and examine the results, the findings, of thousands of public surveys on public issues. I believe you will agree that most of the time a majority sentiment adds up to something that makes most encouraging good sense.

I think the challenge of democracy is how to bring more of the simple common sense of the people down here to Washington. You know the highest honor that any citizen can win is a medal given by Congress--you gentlemen are all familiar with it; perhaps some of you have won it--the Congressional Medal of Honor "for courage and bravery above and beyond the call of duty." I would like to suggest that somebody form a citizens committee, a committee of the people, to award a medal to every Congressman and Senator, of either Party, whenever he shows courage and bravery above and beyond the call of politics! Without being disrespectful to our Congressmen, I wonder how frequently that medal would be given.

If we have any time for questions, I would be most happy to answer them.

(Applause)

LIEUT. COLONEL BABCOCK:

Any questions?

A STUDENT OFFICER:

I would like to ask two questions: First, who decides on the subject that will be put to a poll? Second, are your services available--that is, can the President or Congress, or the Army, or a big industrialist come to you and say, "Find out what the people think about this and that"? Who would pay for it?

MR. LYDGATE:

In answer to your first question, the selection of subjects is governed pretty much by what is in the news. Since our service is supported by newspapers, the newspaper editors like to have "hot" copy.

They like to cover public issues. So we cover whatever is in the news. Right now, it is Greece, our foreign policy, taxation, labor legislation. The choice of subject is rather dictated by the course of the news.

The results of our work are available in print to anyone who can read the newspapers. They are syndicated throughout the country, in Washington and elsewhere.

We do not do private commercial work for private clients. Our work is done on behalf of these sponsoring member newspapers. We have, however, on many occasions conducted surveys for various branches of the Federal Government. We do not do it as a systematic thing, but during the war there were many occasions when we were asked if we could not find out certain facts. We were, of course, glad to do so, at our own cost. We could not, however, do that as a regular practice without going bankrupt.

But the government, itself, as you perhaps know, has been developing in recent years a good deal of its own sampling. The Census Bureau does some. The Army has done rather extensive sampling among Army personnel, through Sam Stauffer, whom they got from the University of Chicago, and who is now at Harvard. He did some excellent work and made some very interesting reports.

I think, perhaps, the thing for the Army to do is to set up a regular public opinion survey division of its own, to find out sentiment not only among military personnel but among the civilian population as a whole. I am sure that all provate poll-takers would be most happy to cooperate with any such venture.

A STUDENT OFFICER:

Pursuing that thought a little further, do you think it would be practical to set up a public opinion survey service for Congress? If so, how large a staff would it take?

MR. LYDGATE:

Yes, I think it would be very practicable. It would have to be completely removed from politics. It would have to be rigidly controlled by an impartial person or group.

Granted such a premise, the size of staff is not large. The permanent staff that we have is less than thirty people. Then we have the field interviewers, who are part-time workers. There are about a thousand of them. But it does not take an extensive staff because you do not have a large sample. In our work, we use a minimum of three thousand cases for a coast-to-coast poll. The largest number we have

ever had in a single survey is about forty thousand or fifty thousand. The average size of sample, I suppose, would run somewhere between three thousand to five thousand. That is not a very cumbersome operation in terms of personnel. It is very simple to do. The chief difficulty is finding four or five skilled directors, skilled people with the know-how and experience in polling, to avoid some of the pitfalls. You do not need an extensive personnel. You need a small corps of highly trained research-wise people.

A STUDENT OFFICER:

Is your cross-section of public opinion standard for all cases, or do you tailor it to fit a given question?

MR. LYDGATE:

It is standard for all cases except that our statistical keys vary according to the subject covered. For example, we poll all types in the population and a pretty standard cross-section. Then on the ballot we have identifying keys, age, sex, size of community, political affiliation, previous political affiliation, degree of education, etc. From time to time you add to that list. For example, if you want to find out public sentiment, say, on birth control, it becomes very important to be sure that you get a breakdown by Catholics and Protestants. So you would add that to your statistical key and ask that question.

On the matters affecting labor unions, you would get the vote of the labor union members. So you single them out by your statistical key of control. You could vary that for any group that you want to cover with particular emphasis.

A STUDENT OFFICER:

You mentioned about Congress and public opinion. Could you give any explanation why is it Congress is so oblivious to public opinion polls? Everyone else in the country reads them. Do you have any suggestion as to how that condition can be remedied?

MR. LYDGATE:

There will always be a lag between public opinion and Congressional action. Probably it is inherent in the democratic processes. There are several reasons. I think one of the major ones is that most Congressmen and Senators want to be reelected. It is a human thing; I probably would want to be, too. The longer they are in Washington, the more difficult it is for them to go back to the old home-town and start over again.

When you want to be reelected, the smart thing to do is to play safe. I don't blame them; I would do it, too, probably. When an issue breaks and opinion begins to form, it is safer to wait until sentiment is nine-to-one. Then you don't have much to lose by coming out and taking a stand with the majority. If you do it when opinion is fifty-fifty, you risk your political neck. So the thing that happens--is that the Congressmen or Senators wait. They hold on. They do not commit themselves until they see which way the wind is blowing. Hence, you always find them acting late, that is, behind public sentiment.

Many people say the way to get around this is to have a strong, courageous type of leader in Congress, and that the way to get such a type is to pay more money. Well, maybe that would have just the opposite effect. If becoming reelected were made even more attractive financially, I wonder whether the Congressmen would ever commit themselves to anything. (Laughter)

But, seriously, it is a real problem from the point of view of a Congressman. You get the hell kicked out of you from the minority group that is yelling, yet you have to take them into consideration just as much as you do the majority. So there is always this caution, this timidity, about acting which I think is perhaps inherent in our system. That is why it is so important to have a skilled and able Executive in the Federal Government of the United States; a man who can provide the leadership that Congress is so unable to provide because of the very nature of its system.

MR. PIERCE:

You mentioned over-assessment of public opinion among the minority groups. I wonder, have you carried out any polls for minority groups, especially deep polls for minority groups, along the five steps you mentioned, determining exactly whether a minority group was going the way its political leader suggested it might be going?

MR. LYDGATE:

We have had a good many examples in the field of labor unions. The contrast between the opinions of labor union members polled and the opinions expressed by the leaders of unions often show a very startling contrast.

LIEUT. COLONEL GODARD:

I would like to carry you back to your statement about the lack of courage on the part of Congressmen and Senators, generally, and take a specific issue in which they seem to go completely opposite to that view. I am thinking now of price control. If I remember correctly, a majority of the people in this country were in favor of

retaining price control; yet Congress heaved it out lock, stock, and barrel, or so emasculated it there wasn't anything left.

I wonder, do you have any views on that?

MR. LYDGATE:

There is an interesting point.

Sentiment during the last few weeks of the life of O.P.A. did show a change. Up until about late June or early July we had found, as you say, sentiment for continuing price control. But in the closing weeks there was a considerable shift of sentiment away from price control, except on rent. Rent control continued to be favored.

There was a case--you were quite right--where, up to that point, the sentiment of the Congress was a good deal different from the sentiment of the general population. Normally speaking, you would always expect to find the public in favor of keeping prices from going up because more people are consumers than are manufacturers or producers.

A STUDENT OFFICER:

Has your experience given any indication of the effect of propaganda or advertisement on public opinion? Have you got examples where you have seen public opinion swayed by propaganda drives, or anything like that?

MR. LYDGATE:

It is an interesting question. A great deal more research needs to be done on that point and will be done in the coming years.

But we do know, from such evidence as we have to date, that what seems to affect opinion more than anything else is events, more so than propaganda. I am not saying propaganda is without effect. But when you find a crystallization of opinion, or a change of opinion to any marked degree, it is nearly always associated with some event or happening.

I am thinking, for example, of the period 1939-41 when our people debated whether we should or should not intervene in the European war. That was the period of the America America First Committee, on one side, and the Committee for Aid to the Allies, I think it was called, on the other side. They were both propagandizing madly; both issuing pamphlets, holding rallies, making speeches on each side of the issue. Yet we found no appreciable change in the attitude of the people during that period of propagandizing on both sides.

Then Hitler invaded the Lowlands in May of 1940. This was followed by the invasion of France and the fall of France in June, 1940. Those events brought a very sharp change in the attitude of the American public--a change which propagandizing had been unable to bring about.

The same events caused a big change in attitude toward a third term for Mr. Roosevelt. There had been lots of arguments for and against a third-term and we saw no change in sentiment, but the moment France fell there was a ten-point jump in the percentage who said they wanted to vote for Roosevelt for a third term.

The trend of sentiment on the Supreme Court plan had a close relation to the decisions handed down by the Court during the fight.

There are undoubtedly instances where propaganda does have a big influence. It is difficult to measure because you cannot get sentiment in a vacuum. But I do think the evidence suggests perhaps we ought to revise somewhat our opinions about the power of propaganda. It is a powerful weapon, but I wonder if it is quite as powerful as it has been cracked up to be.

Another factor of great influence on a man's opinion is his economic status. I think if you were listing in order the things which influence opinion, first I would put events; second, I would put man's economic status. People in similar circumstances, we find, tend to think alike. Once you know a person's economic status, you can pretty well predict how he will react on various issues.

The next thing of great importance is age. Young voters feel quite differently on many issues from the middel-aged or the elderly.

A STUDENT OFFICER:

Speaking of the power of propaganda, may I ask a question which I do not intend as being impertinent: Has your organization ever been accused of fostering propaganda for or against a particular item?

MR. LYDGATE:

Yes; we are accused of that almost every day. In every presidential campaign we get accused. I remember in 1936, when we showed Roosevelt way ahead of Landon, we were accused of having sold out to the New Deal for a million dollars. In 1940 we were accused of having sold out to Wall Street because in the closing days of the campaign we showed Willkie gaining in popularity. But the rumor was we had sold out to the Willkie forces for only a hundred thousand dollars.

Right now we are being accused of being anti-labor. Our polls are said to be "stacked against labor" as the general phrase goes. Sentiment, as all of you know, is critical of labor practices and labor policies.

Very frequently the takers of a poll get blamed for the results of the poll. The fact that the public wants organized labor regulated is nothing we are to blame for, but we get blamed as being anti-labor.

We expect to be attacked. We like to be attacked from both sides. That is the ideal way to be. We were investigated by Congress two years ago, which we thought was quite flattering.

GENERAL McKINLEY:

Mr. Lydgate, pursuing that question a little farther, do you find that on an issue where public sentiment goes along about fifty-fifty for a while that when it starts to crystallize, particularly in a political campaign, and gets up to where you publish a definite trend toward one candidate, do you notice that that pulls more people that way, or not?

MR. LYDGATE:

That is, in essence, the band-wagon theory; the theory that if a poll shows a candidate ahead that the publication of poll results will cause people to climb on the band-wagon of the winner.

That theory we have examined very carefully by carrying trends of sentiment throughout political campaigns. We have one study composed of sixteen trends in sixteen different elections. We find that there was no evidence consistent with the band-wagon theory. Under the band-wagon theory, you would expect to find the winning or the leading candidate gaining in popularity as the result of the publication of the news that he is ahead, as people presumably climb on the band-wagon. But actually, as often as not, you find just the opposite: the man starts dropping down after you show he is ahead.

I am thinking of the Kentucky senatorial primary of 1937 when Barkley and Chandler ran against each other. We had four surveys in the course of that campaign. The first one, which was widely publicized in Kentucky, showed Barkley with 67 percent and Chandler with 33 percent. Now under the band-wagon theory, the next survey should have shown Barkley up a little, or at least not losing any. But the next one found him down to 63 percent. People apparently fell off the band-wagon instead of climbing on. In each subsequent survey there was a drop in Barkley's percentage. We finally predicted he would be elected with 57 percent and he won with 55 percent.

In New York State in 1942, in the Dewey-Bennett-Alfange race for governor, we found a situation where Dewey's lead went along unchanged in six successive surveys. The first one showed him 53 percent, the next four showed 53 percent, and the final one showed him 53 percent. He was elected with 53 percent. There was a case where you found no

change whatever, despite the publication of not only our own poll but also the NEW YORK NEWS poll which showed him ahead.

So you don't have a situation consistent with the theory of the band-wagon influence. People take their political convictions rather deeply. You would not expect, for example, during Roosevelt's Administration that the Republicans would vote Democratic just because they thought the Democrats were going to win.

LIEUT. COLONEL BABCOCK:

I would like to have you mention to the class the speed with which your organization can poll the entire nation today.

MR. LYDGATE:

Generally speaking, it takes about ten days to complete a survey. That allows for the time it takes to air-mail the ballots to the interviewers. We give them four days to complete their interviews and then they allow a day or two for getting back the returns and a few days more for tabulation.

We do have a system set up whereby we can take a very fast study of opinion by using the telegraph; that is by telegraphing the question to our interviewers, giving them one afternoon to do their work and telegraphing back the summary of their results. In that way we get sentiment measured within twelve to twenty-four hours, and have done so.

LIEUT. COLONEL BABCOCK:

The second question I have is brought up by a remark of Mr. Gallup when I was speaking to him, concerning challenging one of the Senators who disbelieved the results of the Gallup Poll at one time. Do you find any tendencies on the part of legislatures at this time to pay more and more attention to the public opinion polls and that attention rising so that they would put more dependence on the public opinion polls today?

MR. LYDGATE:

Well, it's hard to say. Someone here in Washington could probably answer that one better than I. There are times when it looks as if Congress is being responsive to public opinion. There are other times when it seems to be not the case. I, personally, do not know. I have not talked to enough Congressmen and Senators to know just how much attention they pay to poll results.

The great drawback of the present system of polling is that we are concerned with national sentiment and sectional sentiment, but we

cannot, by that method of operation, report the sentiment in each one of the four hundred thirty-five Congressional districts. That is a very cumbersome and expensive problem, if you are going to get into that kind of research. The Congressman will say to you, "That may be the way the Nation thinks about the subject, but my own constituents think this way or that way." He is probably right. He probably knows the sentiments of his own constituents as well as anybody does, without taking a poll. Ideally, we should have a system where each Congressman has some kind of a public opinion panel in his own constituency, to whom he is responsive.

A STUDENT OFFICER:

Would it be possible, through a poll, to determine the percentage of people in the country who are susceptible to Communistic influence?

Another question is will you take a poll of public opinion on whether or not people believe that the Communist Party should be barred in this country?

MR. LYDGATE:

We have never had a survey in which we have tried to make a census of the communists or members of the Communist Party. It would be a very difficult thing to do. We have asked the people what impression they have as to the number of communists, but that does not indicate how many communists and sympathizers there actually are. I don't think even J. Edgar Hoover knows, although he has issued one figure--I think it was a hundred thousand--which sounded something like a guess.

As to opinions on the outlawing of the Communist Party, we have had several surveys; one is now in progress and there was another one made about a year ago. We found that at that time there was pretty strong sentiment for outlawing the Communist Party. Whether that is a wise policy, or not, I don't know. It may be wiser to let them be official and let them talk. I am not afraid that by letting Communists talk the country is going to be infected with communism. I think the people in this country have enough sense to distinguish what is good and what is bad in any program. So I am always in favor of letting crackpots have their say. I do not think you can corrupt the American people as easily as some skeptics have supposed.

LIEUT. COLONEL BABCOCK:

Thank you very much, Mr. Lydgate.

(Applause)

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