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PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH METHODS

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Issues of public opinion formation and development is one of the most complicated and important problems of socio-political science of Kazakhstan. At the contemporary stage public opinion is the study object of many human sciences such as sociology, culturology, social psychology, pedagogics, philosophy and religious studies. Political science also shows interest to public opinion. Public opinion issues are not only of scientific interest, but represent socio-political importance as well. In which case it is worth to mention that public opinion and methods of its study have not been sufficiently studied in politico-social science.

Public opinion is a socio-political discipline, which subject matter is to establish regularities and mechanisms of shaping and functioning of large social and political communities' attitude to current problems of reality being of public interest.

The problem of public opinion determination and interpretation first emerged in antique philosophy. In 17-18 centuries the notion of public opinion was used for designation of communal judgments being beyond the government control and affecting political process of taking decision. Such definition became particularly important owing to extended social and political changes. The term "public opinion" gradually gained general scientific character.

Public opinion is approval or disapproval of the publicly observed attitudes and behavior expressed by the particular part of society or society as a whole [1].

Public opinion is historically conditioned and fluctuated status of the people's public conscience expressed only with regard to the problems important for social system.

Contemporary scientific literature gives many definitions of the public opinion. When generalizing these definitions one can single out some logical invariants which one way or another reflect the significant features of this phenomenon.

First, it is well to bear in mind that public opinion comprises not all viewpoints possessed by certain individuals, but is only connected with an issue or situation towards which the given group of individuals stands out as a community.

Secondly, public opinion on specific issue and in specific situation might fundamentally differ from the public opinion on another issue and in another situation or even on the same specific issue but in different situation. Putting it otherwise no abstract or ahistoric public opinion exists or can exist.

Thirdly, public opinion shall be publicly expressed, brought to the notice of the society or some community or otherwise it remains individual view point of separate persons.

Fourthly, public opinion is revealed, when it is spoken out on the problems that are interested to the specific society or specific community.

Fifthly, public opinion is formed only in case of the people's access to the information that is related to specific issue or several issues. Therewith it is necessary to bear in mind that public opinion might arise on the basis of information that can either reflect the actual situation or distort the reality.

Sixthly, public opinion though not being something invariable, nevertheless should possess sufficient intension, certainty and be adhered to throughout a definite time period, which enable to fix this opinion as the public phenomenon.

Based on the above mentioned one can give the following definition of the public opinion: *public* opinion is a social and political phenomenon as specific demonstration of public conscience, complex spiritual formation expressed in evaluations defining evident or concealed attitude to actual problems of reality that is peculiar to separate groups, social and political communities or society as a whole.

Public opinion not coinciding with neither of the forms and types of public conscience represents their peculiar slice as "conscience condition". It ensures a feedback in the system of government, and is an efficient channel of direct democracy and effective leverage of regulating social and political processes and social-political control [2]. Public self-rule and development of democratic forms of power arrangements are impossible without comprehensive study and consideration of the public opinion. Public opinion development and taking it into account facilitate to bring up to the appropriate level the management culture, which deficiency negatively influences the modernization rate and progress.

Public opinion like any other specific politico-social discipline possesses its key notions and categories. They include the following: public opinion subject and object.

The subject of the public opinion means large groups of people united by generic feature, for example by living in the given region, city or by profession and so on. Consequently the public opinion subject such as people majority possesses the internal structure that is important to consider in the applied research. The elements of this structure are classes, social status categories, layers, nations and other social and political communities and individual persons. Public opinion is formed within the framework of these communities, and these communities are its mouthpieces. Involvement of one or another social or political category in the structure of the public opinion subject is caused by importance of a disputed problem and its importance for the given group or category. Specific perception of the happening events, the difference in interests and social and political experience of separate opinion givers stipulate diversity of the actually functioning opinions, collision of interests, their struggle and change towards coordination or polarization of different viewpoints.

It should be noted that the object of the public opinion includes the problems being of the mutual interest for large groups of people or even the society as a whole.

Object of the public opinion is something that serves as the occasion for public opinion formation. The more important the object is and the more it touches upon the common needs, the more prominent public opinion is revealed. Thus in present-day conditions modernization problems, environment conservation, strengthening of peace and removal of nuclear war threat stands in the focus of the public opinion. Depending on the complexity of the internal structure and arrangement of public opinion objects they distinguish opinions on facts, events, phenomena and processes that define public and political existence or objective reality.

It should be mentioned that public opinion can be competent (relevant) to different extent, as the group members can have different levels of knowledge of the problem under evaluation.

In the course of development, the public opinion undergoes the stages of emergence, formation and functioning [3]. It can be formed both spontaneously and consciously. The main ways of the public opinion formation are indoctrination, conviction, imitation and others; the main means of its formation are mass media, verbal advocacy and political agitation, interpersonal communication and so on. The stages of the public opinion formation include the origin of the individual opinions, exchange of views, and crystallization of common viewpoint out of multiple views and finally its objectivization and transition from reflective to reformative (practical) status. In real life these stages take place simultaneously; there can be qualitative leaps and interactive transitions in the development of individual, group and public views.

The formed public opinion is of integrative character. This is not an arithmetical sum of individual views, but concentrated manifestation of collective mind and result of views interchange between the people and fusion representing the society opinion. The content of the formed public opinion is composed only of those evaluations that are shared by the majority, even if these evaluations are not true. Interrelation of true and false public opinion should always be taken into account while identifying its practical value. Social and political essence of the public opinion is revealed in evaluation by a person of one or another process or event from the point of their compliance with a person's interests.

Social and political evaluations are the leading but not the main elements of the public opinion structure. They are based on the knowledge and supported by feelings and emotions. Social and political background assumptions (attitudes) take important place in the structure of the public opinion. In general public opinion represents the unity of rational, emotional and willed aspects.

It ought to be noted that public opinion involves qualitative-quantitative properties. Depending on a person's preferences an opinion can have positive or negative directional effect, or be indifferent. Public opinion can be rather flexible when being shaped regarding to specific social or political issue. However, being formed the opinion can remain unchanged during prolonged period. Moreover public opinion existing during prolonged period is fixed in traditions, norms and customs.

Public opinion possesses its own spheres of circulation of social and regional character. Its social popularity or occurrence shows how wide one or another public opinion is fixed in individual, group, class and national consciousness; the regional sphere of circulation is the evidence of public functioning within some or other administrative boundaries: district, region, state or a country as whole.

Public opinion intensity points to the character of tension emerged around the question under discussion; attention extent of the society members to the given problem expresses the strength of their confidence in rightness and importance of the expressed judgments.

Maturity acts as the widest and the most integrated feature of the public opinion that shows the integral qualitative condition of this phenomenon. Mature public phenomenon is defined by objectivity, high intensiveness, competence, socially and politically important tendency and considerable occurrence.

Spheres of public opinion demonstration are politics, law, ethics, economics, science, culture, religion and so on [4]. Public opinion reveals itself the most distinctly in the sphere of politics. Political tone is peculiar to public opinion in the sphere of politics, where the people's actions are evaluated in terms of the valid and desired legal regulations. Moral evaluations weigh the people's behavior with generally accepted principles and faiths or moral attitudes. Moral evaluations unlike others emerge in all spheres of social-political life and serve as the element of social and political control. Regulatory and educational function of the public opinion distinctly reveals here. In addition to this one can distinguish regulatory, analytical, advisory, expressive and directive functions. But the main function of the public opinion is certainly evaluative.

At the present-day stage complexity and variety of challenges faced before public opinion researchers are linked with necessity of fast response of the scientists to the needs of social-political practice in the course of transition to the market, provision of high scientific quality of the received information, consideration of inverse effect of the research results on public opinion formation and functioning, and on publicity extension.

The foundation of public opinion study is its theoretical and methodological basis, namely drawing up a questionnaire. American Institute of Public Opinion named after George Gallup developed so-called quintamimensional plan in 1940s based on experience of forecasting election campaign in order to improve methods of public opinion research.

As is known the most critical moment in interview is wording of questions put to respondents. According to George Gallup nothing is so hard and important as selection and wording of questions. It is no coincidence that this part of questioning technique was the mostly developed in this respect. First those drawbacks of question wording have been revealed, which occurred in not sufficiently qualified questioning. The following drawbacks have been revealed in question statement:

- questions are put to people who have no idea of discussed topic;
- no difference is made between those who made judgments on the fly and those who weigh all pros and contras when speaking out his or her opinion;
- questions are worded so that might have different meaning for different people;
- the main focus is made on conclusive answers “yes” or “no”, while the complicated questions cannot be answered so fast and unambiguously;
- the fact why the respondent sticks to one or another opinion is absolutely ignored;
- intensiveness of the expressed opinion is not considered.

Quintamimensional plan developed by George Gallup and applied particularly for figuring out the attitude to the actual problems should reduce to a minimum the enumerated drawbacks. They provided to investigate five different opinion aspects: 1) respondent's knowledge and perception of the topic; 2) respondent's general outlook on life; 3) reason why respondent sticks to this outlook; 4) respond specific views on specific aspects of the problem; 5) Intensiveness of the expressed opinion. Quintamimensional plan uses five categories of questions: 1) filter question; 2) open or free-answer questions; 3) causal; 4) specific; 5) questions revealing opinion intensiveness.

Any number of questions can be asked within each category depending on the problem and the circumstances. First of all a questioner should establish a fact of a respondent competence, which could be achieved with filter questions as these questions help to clear out actual knowledge of a respondent about specific problem. These questions can be rather diversified but the most popular is the question as follows: Have you heard anything (or read anything) about such suggestion? If a respondent has no idea of the problem, he or she is crossed out from the list of respondents, or questioning is conducted in neutral tones not to influence on a respondent. If a respondent answers indefinitely just saying that he or she has heard or read something about a problem under discussion, then he or she is offered to describe in one's own words what he or she knows. Since the positive answer to the asked question fails to reveal the extent of knowledge about a subject, additional questions can be asked (any number) in order to find out how well a respondent knows the essence of a problem. Such a technique can be applied sometimes: a questioner asks to give pro and contra arguments regarding a specific question. This approach facilitates to exclude rash judgment and to find out respondent's standard of knowledge, at the first stage.

The next stage proposes to ask free-answer question to define a respondent's views. For example: How do you think this problem should be solved? Since a respondent is not limited by alternative options, the responses can be diversified and rather unexpected. A questioner should fix them as exactly as possible. The answers to open questions are harder to interpret than the answers to other types of questions. So the questionnaire forms lack them as a rule. However the quintamimensional plan contains one or two questions of this type.

Third category of questions, causal questions, are intended to define why a respondent sticks precisely to these views and not to others. Questions of third and fourth categories can be asked in any order. In practice specific questions are often asked immediately after open questions. Casual questions are important in order to get idea of the qualitative features of an opinion.

Specific questions that already contain specific suggestions about solution of one or another problem mainly propose short negative or affirmative answers. They are mostly useful in terms of forecasting further respondent's behavior and behavior of particular electors. At this George Gallup thinks possible to return to those who have been crossed out after first two questions. Having explained to them the gist of the problem and learned their opinion it looks interesting to compare their opinion with opinion of well-informed persons. Such comparison casts light upon factors that influence opinion formation. When drafting specific questions the complicated problem is split into several straight-out (categorical) questions. While answering these questions a respondent might reply that he or she has not a definite opinion. Advantage of the quintamimensional plan lies in the fact that it enables to better understand what is concealed behind a reply "no opinion". If there were no filter or open questions, it would be hard to find out why a respondent answers "no opinion", whether it is connected with the fact that a respondent has no idea of the topic or he or she is not able to give categorical affirmative or negative answer after weighing up all pros and contras.

Specific questions involve several options of sentences stated as opposite positions. Disadvantage of such questions is that it is hard to select alternative options that would cover the whole range of opinions on the given problem and at the same time could mutually cancel each other out. Moreover, they always try to avoid extreme views. Filter question enable to realistically evaluate respondents who lack their opinion. Open questions enable to get idea whether alternative options cover the possible range of opinions on the problem under discussion or not. Along with questions clearing up the intensiveness of opinions they point to whether a respondent consciously or not tries to avoid straight-out answers.

Questions of the fifth type are asked with an aim to find out intensiveness of the expressed opinions. They help to clarify how strong is conviction of adherers to a particular view, what actions one or another person is ready to take to implement his or her views, whether it is possible to change his/her view or not, etc. To find out all this the questions can be asked with the following options of responses: How strong are you convicted in this? – Very strong, rather strong, not strong.

In my opinion, the quintamimensional plan is the most basic research of the public opinion, and very expensive by the way. According to George Gallup "there are many cases, when quintamimensional plan usage would be waste of time and efforts, where other polling techniques could be more useful. However if to take into account positive aspects of this approach, then it ought to be taken as the master sample for assessment of all other options of public opinion polling, which number is recently spiraling'.

Among variety of poll options that take place in the counties with developed network of sociological agencies one can single out open nationwide and regional polls, which results are widely published, and consequently become known to the public; and there closed polls or confidential polls conducted on the order of political clients and also various associations of industrialists, trade unions, private persons and various entities. In addition, polls are conducted by various research centers for the applied and academic purpose. Agencies that deal with public opinion polls and then publish their results in mass media make up small portion relative to other agencies and firms that are engaged in polls. According to M.Field it is hardly possible to count a dozen of such agencies that conduct polls on the constant and regular basis. The leading agency in this group is the Institute of G.Gallup and firm of L.Harris. D.Yankelovich has become popular recently; he founded a firm Yankelovich, Skelly & White, Inc. There are several less famous organizations. Mentioning that American Institute of Public Opinion and similar centers make up only 5% of all organizations conducting polls, George Gallup underlines that 95% account for companies conducting polls on the order of the private clients throughout the country. Even if 5% of these organizations still stick to certain rules in their activities, which is necessary to support the image of firms, there is no way to make the remained 95% of private pollsters to follow the same norms and rules.

Electors almost know nothing about private pollsters, whose services are used by candidates at high remuneration. Their activity is confidential. And this feature is the main difference of these private firms from such organizations as Gallup Institute and Harris Firm that publish the results of their polls in the newspapers throughout the whole country.

Notwithstanding that the practice of the closed polls was established during the last decades, these polls became the integral element of each more or less significant campaign. Russian experience of 1996 pre-election campaign has confirmed universal applicability of these polls. This experience should be applied here in Kazakhstan.

Closed polls are intended to help candidates standing for elections in many respects. First, they contribute to their familiarization with “political anatomy” of electorate, which enable to determine conditions for getting majority of votes; second, they enable to find out the electors’ opinion of a candidate; third, these polls promote to reveal what problems exercise the electors most of all. In general confidential polls exert great influence on elaborating by a candidate of a certain strategic and tactical line of election campaign.

Numerous researches are devoted to electors’ behavior, which is the evidence that this behavior is influenced by such factors as social environment or neighbourhood, increasing interest to politics, problems emerging during election campaign, political image of a candidate, party affiliation of electors and a candidate and their striving to belong to certain public groups, traditions of party orientation and so on. These factors are incomparably more important in elector’s decision-making than publication of candidates’ political platforms.

Speaking of influence exerted on electors by publications of these polls, one should not forget about effect of these polls publications (and such publications have manipulative character, and are made deliberately), but at the same time the effect of this factor is not to be considered independently from others; it should be remembered that this factor reveals itself in various circumstances with different effect.

Using polls in election campaigns is not their only role in political-social life of the country. Public opinion is studied on wide range of problems of domestic and foreign policy, and the conclusions revealed at the result of these polls exert certain influence on political situation in the country as a whole. However it ought to remember that manipulative function of the polls, their transparency (publication) or closed nature, is particularly traced during election campaign, when infinite possibilities arise for activity of private firms conducting closed or confidential polls at the result of dirty games of politics by different public figures.

Practical aspects of public opinion study are certainly of great importance [5]. Use of international experience might be very useful for Kazakhstani sociologists and politologists and make invaluable contribution to democratization of political-social life in the Republic.

Finally, summarizing the results a conclusion can be made that public opinion is a condition of collective consciousness reflecting expressly or implicitly the attitude of the society or its part to social phenomena and processes, activity of individuals or groups, organizations, etc. To date wide-scale and systematic study of public opinion and technique of its research is important and integral part of political-social life of democratic state, particularly in periods of election campaign, referendums and others. In estimating place and role of the public opinion it is impossible to admit not only nihilistic attitude to public opinion, but supernormal and exaggerated attitude thinking that public opinion is able to solve all the issues. Activeness and importance of the public opinion are defined by the character of the society social structure, development level of economic culture, democratic institutions and freedom. Public opinion represents assessment of events significance. The correct methodological framework of public opinion study plays an important role in this issue.

1. *Новейший социологический словарь.* – Минск, 2010. – С. 663.

2. *Алексеев Г.П. Социальные политические процессы.* – Ростов-на Дону, 2012. – С. 105.

3. *Общество и человек.* – М., 2010. – С. 95.

4. *См.: New Silk Road and the Global Diaspora.* – Guanju, 2012. – S. 9-10.

5. *См.: Sozialphilosophische, politische und rechtliche Aspekte der Modernisierung Kasachstans.* – Berlin, 2012. – S. 102-110, 119-127, 135-142.

Түйін

Мақалада қоғамдық пікірдің зерттеудің өзекті әдістемелік мәселелері қарастырылады. Сонымен бірге мақалада дискуссиялық мәселелерге көңіл бөлінген.

Резюме

В статье рассматриваются актуальные вопросы методики исследования общественного мнения. В статье уделено внимание и дискуссионным вопросам.