

What makes us tick?

Polling and international understanding

Fergus Hanson

THERE have been valiant attempts over centuries and across continents to try to understand the prevailing mood of the times. From Herder and Hegel's *Zeitgeist* to Le Bon's collective behaviour and Durkheim's collective consciousness, the notion has evolved that as a group, society or nation we have views or sentiments that can be reduced to an average. Until very recently, these attempts to discover the nature of this collective view were the domain of philosophers and sociologists, poets and politicians.

In the latter camp was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who attempted to gauge the prevailing mood by encouraging the American people to write to him with their concerns. His urgings resulted in a mail count averaging a whopping five to eight thousand items per day – ten times the average of Herbert Hoover, his predecessor.

FDR kept close tabs on these communications. He ordered the mail room do daily tallies on the topics they covered, and if he were making an important address or a controversial issue arose the count would be refined into those for and against the proposal.

In addition to these quasi-scientific approaches the President would also try to sample the mail by dipping his arm into a mass of letters and choosing one at random.¹

IT WAS AROUND this time that attempts to determine the collective consciousness underwent something of a revolution, with the development of the first scientific opinion polls.

The idea of polling had been around for some time. The Roman Empire developed something of a fetish for counting its citizens. The censors responsible for this task were most focused on the extent of each citizen's property for taxation purposes, never hitting upon the idea of surveying their respondents about their preferred emperor or views on the invasion of Caledonia, let alone identifying the collective mind.

Then again, perhaps they didn't need to. The other main function of the censors was the regulation of public morals. By virtue of their mandate to register citizens of the Empire and decide their rank, the censors developed considerable powers to reward or punish good and bad moral behaviour, in effect regulating the prevailing public mood.

After the disintegration of the Empire there was little innovation in the world of opinion polling until the development of the straw poll. The first such poll is dated to 1824 and was taken in the United States. The practice was repeated in succeeding elections but there was no real effort to ensure the polls were representative of the voting population. Unsurprisingly, the predictions derived from the results were often of sub-optimal quality.

Beginning in 1916, *The Literary Digest* tried to take straw polling to a new level by sampling huge volumes of voters. It developed a good reputation for its work, until 1936, when it made a hugely inaccurate prediction about the presidential race. The *Digest* had analysed more than two million ballots in an attempt to predict the election result, but it had relied on ballots sent to telephone subscribers and car owners who, in an America still recovering from the Great Depression, did not represent the American electorate as a whole. The *Digest* predicted Republican Alf Landon would win in a landslide, which brings us back to FDR – the man who actually won.²

IT WAS DURING FDR's term in office that the first scientific opinion polls were conducted, and he was the first world leader to hit upon the idea of using opinion polling to inform foreign policy.

In 1939, FDR sent a request to the publisher of the *Washington Post*, asking him to see if George Gallup would conduct a poll to ascertain the American public's view towards the United States' involvement in the war in Europe – and report the findings to the White House.³

Gallup polls in 1939 revealed signs that parts of the American public were moving away from isolationism. Fifty-seven per cent agreed, for example, with changing the neutrality law to allow the United States to sell war materials to England and France, and a large majority (69 per cent) were in favour of doing everything possible to help England and France to win the war – except going to war themselves.⁴

IT WAS NOT long before the new concept of scientific polling spread to the Asia-Pacific, opening up the possibility of better understanding the collective thinking of the region's diverse peoples.

The first scientific opinion poll in Australia (finding 59 per cent in favour of equal pay for women) appeared in 1941.⁵ However, not everyone was happy about this new science that professed to tell politicians, writers and poets what the collective nation thought. Robert Menzies was particularly irked by the audacity of the new Zeitgeist readers.

He described a poll published by Keith Murdoch as 'a wanton and calculated blow', even going so far as to suggest that Sir Keith should have suppressed the results and writing to him: 'Do you regard Gallup Poll questions as divinely inspired, or are they chosen by human beings? ...Can you really believe that you can strike down the leader of a Party (when you do not suggest any alternative leader in the Parliamentary rank) and do no injury to the Party?'⁶

Sir Keith was unmoved.

POLLS HAVE ALSO been used by governments across the region to try and improve their understanding of foreign peoples.

From 1973, the Japanese Embassy in Canberra began to conduct regular opinion polling in Australia to measure and track Australian attitudes towards Japan and to test the effectiveness of its foreign policy initiatives.

These polls tracked shifts in Australian attitudes away from seeing Japan in terms of enemies, militarism and POW camps – among the most commonly held associations with Japan in the 1976 survey, a legacy of World War II.

By the 1980s these polls picked up a new focus of concern. Two-thirds of Australians had consistently said Australia should be friendly towards Japan. That proportion fell away in 1988, following the debate on Japanese investment, with 75 per cent saying they wanted no more Japanese investment in Australia.⁷

The Japanese did not use this polling to forestall the backlash against their investment, but it must have provided a strong guide to where they needed to prioritise their diplomatic efforts.

Lowy Institute polling shows Australians now have very warm feelings towards Japan and high levels of trust in it to act responsibly in the world.⁸ Despite this positive sentiment, the Japanese Foreign Ministry continues to conduct polling in Australia, and its 2009–10 poll⁹ still included questions about Japan and its role in World War II.

Japan does not just focus its polling on Australia. In 2008, it conducted opinion polling in six ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam).¹⁰

LIKE JAPAN, THE United States takes opinion polling seriously as a tool in enhancing understanding of the region's diverse cultures. The US State Department makes regular use of publicly available opinion polls but also commissions its own opinion polling through the Office of Opinion Research, which has a staff of forty-one and a budget of US\$11.6 million¹¹ (although not all of these resources are dedicated to polling).

These polls conducted in places like Indonesia are not made publicly available but are a useful tool for tracking changes in Indonesian opinion, for example in response to major US initiatives such as its tsunami relief.

Even countries well beyond the region are conducting polling in the Asia-Pacific. The Scottish Executive, for example, polled in China to support its strategy of closer engagement.¹² Most governments are coy about their survey activities in foreign countries, so it is hard to know exactly which ones are conducting polling and where.

The Australian Government has not integrated opinion polling into its foreign policy to the same extent as other countries, although it does use it. The Australian aid agency, AusAID, conducts domestic polling on its aid program, and Tourism Australia and AusTrade conduct market research to inform campaigns like 'Brand Australia'. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has also conducted limited polling in the region.

Of course, governments are not the only ones polling in the Asia-Pacific. A wide range of companies, think tanks and not-for-profit research organisations are polling people from Tokyo to Townsville.

THERE ARE AT least two ways that these opinion polls might be subtly serving the stability of the international system.

First, public opinion polls provide a level of surety to the international system that did not previously exist. Before the pioneering polling work in the 1930s, it was very hard to determine what was the prevailing mood in countries around the world. Imagine, for example, if world leaders had accurate polls of German public opinion when they were making early efforts at appeasement. Might the British Government have changed policy towards Germany earlier if they had been able to measure the depth of resentment among Germans?

Today polls provide this service in the background. They let other countries know that things are more or less on track – and when they are not, provide early warning that a change is underway.

Consider what happens when a poll suggests everything is not quite alright. On 29 March 2005, the *International Herald Tribune* carried the front-page headline

'Australians view U.S. as a threat to peace' after a Lowy Institute Poll found 57 per cent of Australians were very or fairly worried about US foreign policies.

Rupert Murdoch was reportedly so surprised by the findings that he raised the issue with the American Australian Association in New York.¹³ The issue was then taken up with Prime Minister John Howard who, a year later, announced the creation of a \$25 million endowment to establish a United States Studies Centre to increase understanding of the United States in Australia.

Polls also provide a level of surety by informing policymakers how countries are likely to behave. They show them the domestic incentives and restraints that foreign leaders will have to take into account when making foreign policy. By knowing a bit about prevailing Japanese sentiment towards the deployment of Japanese armed forces abroad, for example, policymakers could get a pretty good idea of how far the Japanese leadership is likely to be moved when pushed on this issue.

SECOND, OPINION POLLS might well function as a mirror in the international system. We often hear tourists asked, 'So what do you think of Australia?' Which is a funny question, when you consider there is only one right answer. It does, however, suggest the rather human inclination to want to be liked.

Polling provides a similar type of service in the international system. We like to see that New Zealanders, Canadians and Japanese have favourable feelings about Australia. We accept that some countries – Iraq or North Korea – might not like us that much, but what if polls showed New Zealanders or Americans liked North Koreans more than us or, worse, they showed no one in the world liked us? Surely the collective consciousness would be quite troubled?

This type of effect might have been at play during the Presidency of George W Bush. Public opinion towards America plummeted around the world during his first term in office – even among close allies like Australia. It is debatable what impact this had on US domestic opinion – after all, Bush was re-elected – but it was conceivably a factor in the election of Barack Obama.

Of course, being liked is not everything. Polling shows US popularity around the world has soared since the election of President Obama. However, that has not necessarily translated into getting others to help the United States – witness Chinese obstructionism at Copenhagen and strained US–Japan relations.

POLLS ARE NO panacea, nor are they perfect tools for understanding foreign cultures. As Walter Lippmann wrote in one of the seminal early books on collective opinion, 'public opinion deals with indirect, unseen, and puzzling facts and there is nothing obvious about them.'¹⁴ All of which suggests modern-day poets and

pundits still have plenty of years of fruitful employment ahead of them interpreting the collective consciousness.

However, if polls do provide policymakers with a degree of surety about how other countries will behave, and act as something of a mirror for the international system, then they will remain important tools in guiding the world through the dramatic power shifts of the Asia-Pacific century.

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