

Reporting public opinion polls in China

1. Introduction

Since the eighteenth century, public opinion—the vital view of the people—has become a routine factor in civic society. In democratic countries, it has also been significantly relevant to governmental affairs. As part of journalistic practices to organize citizens' expressions of opinion systematically, polls have become a useful news resource. Presumably, media reports of polls provide accurate information of opinion distribution for the audiences so that they learn where public opinion may stand and make enlightened decisions regarding public issues, if necessary. In the news, neither the language of the polls nor the concomitant survey results are self-explanatory. Therefore, it is theoretically and practically important to look at how public opinion polls have been integrated into political news coverage.

In China, unlike the democratic parties in the West, the Chinese Communist Party holds tremendous power and unrivaled authority. According to priming theory, citizens' political preferences are influenced substantially by frames and cues provided by the news media. It is a well known fact that news media in China are under the strict control of the state. Without access to news media to express their opinions, Chinese citizens have sought other means to do so. In recent year, more and more intense conflicts between the public and the state have emerged, bringing instability and disorder to the society. As such, polls have been used to gauge public sentiments in China. How the polls are reported in the news media, however, has yet to be systematically examined.

This study explores the following research questions: In the context of China, what sectors of public concerns have been reported in the process of opinion formation and presentation? Do the news media cover the poll results in a way that allows the public to assess the reliability and validity of the opinion survey? How do the media interpret the poll results in news stories? Does the framework of poll reports change during a long period since 1980s?

2. Historical ties of polling to journalism

Defined by Philip Meyer in his book *Precision Journalism* (1973), polls have become topical, relating directly to issues in the news. Due to those hard data and statistical facts provided by survey results, polls are considered more reliable than the interview which reporters once relied on exclusively (Paletz et al. 1980).

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, polls were conducted by a variety of newspaper (Robinson 1932), especially in 1935, which witnessed the emergence of both the newspaper syndicated Gallup Poll and the Fortune Poll (Crespi 1980). The correct forecast of Roosevelt's landslide victory over Landon by all three polls established public opinion polls as a standard journalistic feature in presidential election years. In the 1970s news organizations, large and small, began to enter the lists as polling agencies in rapidly increasing numbers (Dionne 1980, Rippey 1979).

Today, media sponsorship of public opinion polls has mushroomed (Crespi 1980, Gollin 1980). News-gathering organizations are not simply printing or broadcasting the finding of others. Instead they are creating news on their own initiative choosing topics, which shaped their phrasing of questions and responses in measuring public

opinion.

3. A mirror of public opinion

In democratic society, opinions are not isolated and independent of observation, but emerge from interactions between researchers and members of the public, and between members of the public themselves. In this case, reporting of polls becomes a mirror through which people look into the public opinion.

Reporting of polls can provide citizens with the information about what others think, if they are interested. More generally, it provides a way of studying humans and the ways in which they organize themselves and live their lives (Newport 2004). It extended opinion soundings down to the local level, providing periodic reports on public attitudes, beliefs, and behavior that varied widely in depth, balance, and degree of sophistication in the handling of poll data (Gollin 1980). The images offered by them are “synthetic, believable, passive, vivid, concrete, simplified, and ambiguous as never before” (Boorstin 1961).

Having been polled as a representative of the public, the citizen can then read reports and see how he looks. As polls become more scientific and detailed—broken down into occupations, counties, income groups, religious denominations, etc.—the citizen can discover himself (and the opinion which he “ought” to have or is likely to have). Public opinion becomes more and more an image into which the public fits its expression (Gollin, 1980).

4. A proximate cause of policy

Evidence has been presented that reporting of public opinion is often a proximate

cause of policy. At first, we can see how collective decision making can work out well. Polls can distill the wisdom of the members of society (Newport 2004). This is based on a key assumption that groups of people often have more wisdom among them than does any one person alone, and it is these collective opinions that provide a distillation of knowledge and insights that is more likely to be sensible and useful than the insights and knowledge of single individuals or small groups of people independently. It makes sense, then, that political leaders ought to pay attention to collective public opinion that can reflect this wisdom.

Secondly, mass media have increasingly been assigned a powerful role in shaping political beliefs and behavior. Public deliberation is essential to democracy, in order to ensure that the public's policy preferences—upon which democratic decisions are based—are informed, enlightened, and authentic. In modern societies, however, public deliberation is largely mediated, with professional communicators rather than ordinary citizens talking to each other and to the public through mass media of communications. In democratic society, the public generally believes that media of all kinds consistently have large persuasive effects on political opinion (Parisot 1990; Schudson 1996). Through reporting polls results, mass media can conceivably affect people's orientations to politics (Gollin, 1980). In the United States, this transformation power of the public opinion polls in press has been widely recognized.

5. Critics for reporting of polls

Just as its academic supporters, the validity of reporting of polls also has its critics. The past quarter century of scholarship on public opinion has shown that

citizens' attitudes can be influenced significantly by how elites frame their communications in the mass media (Chong et al. 2007). According to these researchers, a speaker "frames" an issue by encouraging readers or listeners to emphasize certain considerations above others when evaluating that issue. A framing "effect" occurs when individuals arrive at different positions on the issue, depending on the priority given to various considerations (Druckman et al. 2003).

Such studies raise questions about the capacity of poll results reported by mass media to provide "true" public opinion into the democratic process. If citizens' perceptions and preferences of politics and social life can be arbitrarily manipulated by how issues are framed, there can be no legitimate representation of public interests or meaningful discussion of government responsiveness (Bartels 2003, Boorstin 1961, Entman 1993, Gillin 1980, Zaller 1992). Public opinion fails in these instances as a reliable guide to policy.

Besides, until today, there is still a hot debate about whether poll is a scientific method to gather public opinion or not. Critics argued that "public opinion" could not be measured simply by summing responses to survey questions (Blumer 1948, Rogers 1949). Pollsters know that survey results can be altered by subtle changes in question wording, by differences in interview method, or by sampling different populations. But the public, who do not have special knowledge, might accept "scientific" survey results without asking if the questions were loaded or the samples biased (Miller et al. 1982).

Hoffman (1980) condemned polls as a form of checkbook journalism. This

“manufactured news,” he charged, neither accurately reflects opinion nor impresses the public. Actually, from raw data to findings, the process of presentation and interpretation of opinion polls in news media shows an opportunity for internal and external management or manipulation (Chang 1999, Mann et al. 1992, Paletz et al. 1980)

6. Standards for reporting of polls

In order to avoid the problem that citizens misled by reporting of polls, democratic theorists have stressed the importance of providing the public with sufficiently full, accurate, and well interpreted information (Page 1996). Only in that case, citizens can decide what policies they want in an informed way, consistent with their basic values and interests. Then it makes sense to insist that government act accordingly, and democracy can work well.

According to this requirement, at least three preconditions—awareness, credibility, and an identification with the consensus or group variations—should be revealed by poll findings (Gollin 1980). In an effort to make certain that minimal biased information is made public, the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) adopted a code of standards of disclosure (Miller et al. 1982). To meet these standards, any reports of survey results must include sample size, the sponsor, and other elements.

These standards are primarily guidelines for pollsters releasing survey results. However, it is obvious too strict for the journalism practices, considering the limited time in news-making and space on newspapers. The standards and pollster-journalist

relations were primary concerns of special symposiums of *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1971 and 1980 and of a conference sponsored by the national council of Public Polls and the Kettering Foundation in 1979 (Miller et al 1982).

Some studies have been done to examine the standards made by AAPOR. Broh (1980) examined polls carried in the *New York Times* and by the national television networks. He concluded that journalists focus heavily on horserace aspects of elections and often distort or disregard findings. Palez et al. (1980) examined polls published in the *New York Times* and broadcast by CBS and NBC. They found that sample size and sponsorship were reported by the Times 67 percent of the time, and sampling error, 7 percent. They reported no other data relevant to the AAPOR standards. Miller and Hurd (1982) examined three newspapers' level of conformity of AAPOR standards of minimal disclosure in their reporting of public opinion polls. They indicated that conformity is higher when the polls concern elections rather than nonelection topics of the polls.

7. Social context in China

Curran and Park (2000) classified mainland China as a particular case of transitional and mixed society, which refers to countries that are being transformed or regions with mixed regimes. Since the political reform started in the late 1970s, openness has brought market economy, liberalism, and democratic ideas simultaneously. Influenced by these ideas, people are expecting a complete political reform, while the CCP still want to maintain his authority. The conflicts between them are intense than ever.

Since the 1990s, state subsidies have been gradually reduced or terminated to media organizations, in order to lighten the financial burden of government. Profit-making media accept advertising and sponsorship to publish “weekend supplement” with juicy information. Market has actually shifted the role of the media from of a party organ of propaganda to a multiplicity of roles of entertaining, educating, and informing the audience. However, the states still keep very tight controls over party organs and political news in other media. This is the way through which the government considering to maintain its legitimacy. So it is unsurprising that some scholars doubt that reporting of polls in Chinese media as ideological control rather than presentation of public opinion.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, survey research was re-adopted in the early 1980s, beginning with Beijing audience survey in 1982. In the middle of 1980s, with the emergence of official, semiofficial, and private polling organizations, a golden era of survey research started. In 1984, Chinese government approved the establishment of two survey teams, in urban and rural area respectively, to conduct regular public opinion polls. In the same year, China Statistical Information Consulting Service Center was established, taking special investigation and providing paid services. Renmin University of China Public Opinion Research Institution, the first unofficial survey organization, was established in October 1986. Besides academic research, this institution also serviced for the government by providing information and suggestions for policy making.

During this golden era, survey content expanded from audience to public opinion

and business. These survey adopted western social statistic analysis, which can reflecting the current situation and trend of public opinion in China. However, the results of opinion surveys cannot be published broadly until 1990s. For example, the result of Beijing audience can only published in overseas edition of *China Daily*.

After 1992, newspapers started to turn opinion polls into a new source for journalism, presenting statistics and different figures from survey results. At the same time, some major newspapers started their own polling operation. *Beijing Youth Daily* and *China Youth Daily* were among the earliest to use full-page section to publish these “social survey” periodically, and create a public sphere for public discussion. January 3rd 1996, *Beijing Youth Daily* first used the concept “precision journalism” in its report. Since then, reporting polls became a new trend for mass media.

As mentioned before, citizens’ attitudes can be influenced significantly by how elites frame their communications in the mass media. Chinese media are strictly controlled by the states. So it is easier for the government to manipulate the reporting of opinion polls, if they want to control citizens’ perceptions about public opinion. Since we cannot test the validity of the result of polls through elections, following those standards made by democratic societies is the only way to reduce the possibility of misleading.

8. Method

Sampling

For the purpose of this study, Content analysis was used to examine the reporting of polls in *People’s Daily*. As the central party newspaper in mainland China, *People’s*

Daily is managed under the most strictly ideological control and considered as the model of all other newspapers. It makes *People's Daily* the most typical objects of observation, if we try to figure out whether there is a problem with the reporting of opinion polls in China. Besides, the first news story about opinion polls in China published in *People's Daily* can be traced back to 1983, allowing us for a longitudinal observation.

Public opinion is an aggregate attitude. More specifically, it is belief expressed by the public about issues of public concern. In this study, only domestic affairs were cared about. Moreover, in order to compare different types of interpretations about opinion polls, two types of news stories are specified. One is *reporting of public opinion* polls, in which the news expounds on and expands the survey data before them. The other is *reporting with public opinion polls*, referring to the fact that poll data are integrated into the news usually to support or amplify the story's main theme. Besides, the number of news stories containing the word "public opinion" was calculated to test the universality of this idea. Editorial, letters, and advertisement are excluded. The unit of analysis is the news story.

According to the database of *People's Daily*, during the study period, it published a total of 35 *reporting of opinion polls*, and 106 *reporting with opinion polls*. 21349 news stories were selected due to the keyword searching of "public opinion". In addition, another 47 news stories were found to introduce opinion poll as an advanced social statistic research method to the readers.

Coding

One of the motions of this study is to examine whether basic information about

the background of the survey, the structure of the polling procedure, and the boundary of the data was provided in the news story, through which interpretations of the survey findings could be put proper perspective. Another one is to compare those three types of news stories about opinion polls, in order to figure out the political power on the public opinion.

According to the standards for news reporting of opinion from AAPOR and previous researches, we chose eight categories as the coding standards in this study, which are focus of polls, sponsor of polls, conductor of polls, population identified, period identified, graph provided, Interview method, and sample size.

The coding scheme was tested on a random sample of stories between two independent coders. Using Krippendorff's alpha, the reliability coefficient for each variable was as follows: focus of polls (0.707); sponsor of polls (0.717); conductor of polls (0.806); population identified (0.774); period identified (0.774); graph provided (1.00); interview method (0.882); sample size (1.00). The average alpha equals to 0.833.

9. Findings

Related issues

During the process of sampling, it is worth noting that “public opinion” is a very high frequency words used in the speeches of political leaders and process of policy making. It means that public opinion has been accepted as a common idea in the process of political deliberation in China. However, we cannot conclude that public opinion plays the same role as it plays in democratic society, only depending on this

data. So we further compared the number of news stories related with a specific opinion poll with it. Table 1 shows a big gap between what the governments says and what they really want to tell the public. From 1983 to 2010, the total number of those news stories containing the concept “public opinion” is about 10 times more than the number of those news stories about opinion polls.

Table 1 Related issues in People’s Daily, 1983-2010

Related issues	N
News story containing “public opinion”	21349
Reporting of opinion polls	35
Reporting with opinion polls	106
News story introducing opinion polls	47

Turning to the developing trend during the past 27 years, Figure 1 reveals the increasing trend of both news stories containing “public opinion” and news stories about opinion polls. However, the gap between them is rising, too. More detail of those three types of news stories about opinion polls can be seen in Figure 2. The number of reporting of opinion polls almost maintained at the same level, while the other two kept increasing. Therefore, under the appearance of prosperity, public opinion’ level of participation in political deliberation is quite limited in *People’s Daily*. It approved, from the other side, that the process of political revolution in China developed slowly since the reform and opening.

Reporting of opinion polls and reporting with opinion polls

In order to examine how opinion polls are conceived, measured and reported in the *People’s Daily*, the standards of AAPOR were adopted. More comparison between reporting of public opinion and reporting with public opinion were conducted in this

section in order to figure out the problem of reporting public opinion in mainland China.

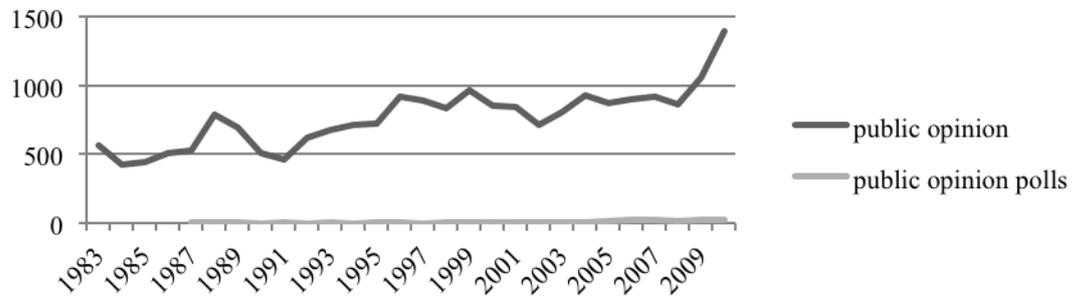


Figure 1 Trends of news stories containing “public opinion” and about opinion polls

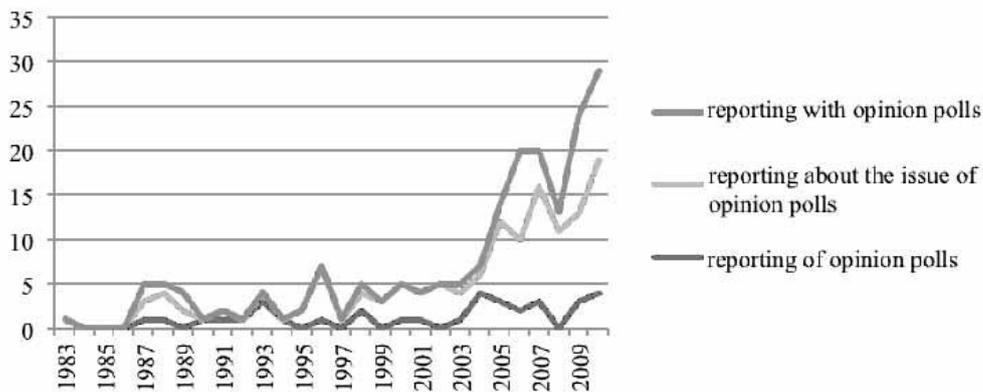


Figure 2 Trends of related issues of opinion polls

Table 2 Focus of polls in People’s Daily, 1983-2010

focus of polls	Reporting of Polls (%)	Reporting with Polls (%)	Total (%)
education	-	1.9	1.4
housing	-	3.8	2.8
quality of life	58.3	17.0	27.5
health	-	4.7	3.5
transportation	-	5.7	4.2
environment	-	8.5	6.3
crime	-	11.3	8.5
social values	8.3	4.7	5.6
government	33.3	42.5	40.1
N	35	106	141

According to Table 2, apparently, *reporting with polls* covers more issues than *reporting of polls*, especially in the area of people’s daily life. It is rare to see journalists using poll results to support their main theme in news stories related to education, housing, health, transportation, environment and crime. *Reporting with polls* really focuses on the issues about the perception of quality of life (58.3%) and evaluation of government (33.3%). These two topics are the most important topics in *reporting with polls*, as well, but their proportions are different (17% and 42.5%). Besides, journalists were also interested in the topic of social security, taking 11.3% of *reporting with polls*, while the left six issues, education, housing, health, transportation, and environment, shared similar attentions.

It is conceptually important to name the sponsors and conductors behind polls. Because it is critical in determining whose vested interest is likely to be served when policy initiatives are involved or when there are attempts to channel public opinion or public perception on issues of general concern in a given direction. Equally important is to know who the conductors are because the reliability and validity of the polls hinge on specific knowledge and methodological competence in getting the job done.

Table 3 Sponsor of polls in People’s Daily, 1983-2010

sponsor	Reporting of Polls (%)	Reporting with Polls (%)
government ministries	41.7	34.9
universities/other schools	5.6	4.7
research institutions	5.6	14.2
commercial polling services	-	0.9
media organizations	25.0	4.7
not clear	22.2	40.6
N	35	106

Table 4 Conductor of polls in People's Daily, 1983-2010

Sponsor	Reporting of Polls (%)	Reporting with Polls (%)
government ministries	30.6	17.9
universities/other schools	5.6	4.7
research institutions	11.1	17.0
commercial polling services	2.8	2.8
media organizations	25.0	4.7
not clear	25.0	52.8
N	35	106

Table 3 and Table 4 shows that more than 75% *reporting of opinion polls* identified their sponsors and conductors, making it easier for readers to speculate on why the polls might have been conducted or who might benefit from them and the accompanying story. However, nearly half of the reporting with opinion polls did not mention sponsors and conductors. Furthermore, most sponsors and conductors identified in the news stories are government. It means that surveys from universities or research institutes, who are more neutral, have less chance to be reported.

Table 5 looks at various methodological issues that were presented in the poll stories. It is obvious that news media in mainland China have not established the concept of reporting standards for opinion polls yet. In most cases, vital information about sampling method, study period and population definition were not provided in the report, making it difficult for readers to figure out how much confidence they should place in the results.

Table 5 Methodological issues of polls in People's Daily, 1983-2010

Methodological issues	Reporting of Polls (%)	Reporting with Polls (%)
population indentified		
no	55.6	88.7
yes	44.4	11.3
response rate provided		
no	83.3	99.1
yes	16.7	0.9
study period identified		
no	50.0	83.0
yes	50.0	17.0
graph/table provided		
no	97.2	100.0
yes	2.8	-
sample method		
random	11.1	2.8
nonrandom	-	-
not clear	88.9	97.2
types of interview		
telephone	2.8	0.9
personal interview	63.9	1.9
online survey	-	3.8
mixed	2.8	1.9
not clear	30.6	91.5
sample size		
<50	8.3	0.9
101-300	5.6	0.9
301-600	2.8	2.8
601-1200	5.6	2.8
>1200	38.9	13.2
not clear	38.9	79.2
N	35	106

Frame of opinion polls in People's Daily

Ignoring the differences between the two types of polls reporting, all the stories describe a picture of opinion climate in China since the early 1980s. After a framing analysis for these 35 *reporting of polls* and 106 *reporting with polls*, three particular themes during last twenty years can be identified: political revolution (in the 1980s),

anti-corruption (in the 1990s), and evaluation of cadres (in the 2000s). All of them served the core political issues during that period.

10. Conclusion

Public opinion has been accepted as a common idea in the process of political deliberation in China. However, a big gap between what the governments says and what they really want to tell the public were identified when a contrast conducted between different types of reporting. Moreover, under the appearance of prosperity, public opinion' level of participation in political deliberation is quite limited in *People's Daily*, which approved the slow process of political revolution in China since 1978.

The study also reveals that *reporting of opinion polls* and *reporting with opinion polls* have covered almost every aspect of public issues involved in the polls. In particular, *reporting with public opinion polls* covers a much wider range of issues than *reporting of public opinion polls*. The latter focuses mainly on the issues related to quality of life, government, and social values. Surveys of many other issues were not reported as independent stories, but were used as positive evidences to support the main theme. These two kinds of reporting have significant differences not only in their focus, but also in reporting the methods of polls. None of them essentially meets the criteria of reporting polls identified in this study, hence reducing their reliability and validity to a great extent.

In addition, during the past three decades, three main themes can be identified in the news stories about opinion polls in *People's Daily*. All of them serve the best

interest of the state, not that of the public. Therefore, it is clear that the state in China has sought to maintain its own legitimacy and authority by using poll reports in the news media to justify its performance and thus to influence Chinese people's fundamental political attitudes.

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