

Daniel Kunštát, (ed.): Czech Public Opinion: Theory and Research

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Public opinion surveys have become an integral feature in our lives and we encounter their results in all types of media. Their frequency differs and often depends on how pressing an issue is. The publication is a product of 10-years' work carried out by the Centre for Public Opinion Research of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (CPOR), a research department of the Institute. Current CPOR was created in 2001 when the former Institute for Public Opinion Research relocated from Czech Statistical Office to Institute of Sociology. Main scope of activities of CPOR is covered by the project "Our Society" which involves carrying out 10 public opinion surveys a year using a representative sample of Czech citizens over the age of 15. The questionnaire has an omnibus form which enables including various current topics. Publication consists of contributions by experts and scientists dealing with public opinion research and is divided into five chapters.

First chapter is dedicated to theoretical and methodological aspects of public opinion research. As pointed out by J. Šubrt, public opinion is no longer an exclusively scholarly term (largely thanks to mass media) and has entered our routine vocabulary. People understand this term intuitively, but problems arise when it is to be scientifically defined and specified within sociology.

In the first part, J. Šubrt looks at public opinion from the viewpoint of theory and research practice, as well as the theoretical dilemmas resulting from discussions about the nature of public opinion. The first dilemma deals with the question whether public opinion as a phenomenon existed in previous society types or whether as such it appeared together with the onset of modern society. The second dilemma is associated with two opposing approaches – realist and nominalist. According to the realist approach, public opinion is an objectively existing entity that cannot be reduced to individual opinion. Advocates of the nominalist school only acknowledge the existence of individual opinion. The third dilemma results from the contradiction between pluralist and monist approach. Monist opinion is that public opinion is a manifestation of a general common will. Pluralists on the contrary claim that public opinion is a product of controversy rather than a result of unification.

Author concludes that if we are to leave theory of public opinion and move on to research, we find out that these dilemmas are in practice irrelevant. With respect to the fact that public opinion research these days matches the method applied by George Gallup, researchers are satisfied with a definition of public opinion which can be termed „operational“. Thus, according to this view, public

opinion is that which is subject of public opinion research. In order to eliminate problems and weaknesses of public opinion surveys, J. Šubrt proposes two ways – methodological approaches branded „cognitive approach“ and parallel use of various research methods while interconnecting its findings – this involves mainly quantitative and qualitative methodology.

Classical methodology of P. Lazarsfeld who in his surveys implemented new research approaches, methods and research tools is the topic described by H. Jeřábek. Particularly *Survey Analysis* as an antithesis to the *Public Opinion Poll* model, Model Elaboration as a basis for Survey Analysis, combined use of analytical and quantitative methods, method for decision process research (Reason Analysis), analysis of latent structure – method of identifying latent classes and context analysis – method of utilising aggregate data. Partly thanks to Lazarsfeld's attempts to codify and introduce new research methods into social sciences, this research provides future historians with to a great extent unbiased portrayal of today's world.

J. Vinopal, specialist on current methodological issues in public opinion research, concentrates on cognitive and communicative aspects of standardised questioning. In the text, he focuses on current practice of public opinion research and methodological tools of standardisation. He describes in detail two main methods of acquiring information – interview and filling out questionnaires. In particular he pays attention to shortcomings brought about by standardisation in sociological research, which can substantially influence the quality of acquired data.

Second chapter deals with the relationship between media and public and point out the role of the media in the process of representing reality when creating and influencing public opinion. M. Škodová focuses on public and politics in a media democracy and describes the media as an intermediary between the decisive sphere and citizens. The author concentrates on Habermas and his concept of transforming public sphere and the public, as well as its criticism.

Theoretical background of the agenda-setting method, seen as a function of the mass media that influence public attitudes by preferring certain topics – this is at the centre of an analysis by V. Nečas. Basic hypothesis articulated by McCombs and Shaw says that mass media set the agenda for all political campaigns by affecting the degree of importance of opinions on political topics. According to the author, most sophisticated categorisation of the agenda-setting concept comes from J. Dearing and E. Rogers, who divided this concept into three components – media agenda, public agenda and political agenda.

Possibility of empirical verification of the agenda-setting hypothesis on longitudinal data is presented by F. Kalvas. He chose the example of Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, on the level of media presentation and importance attributed to the topic by the public.

Long-term tendencies concerning trusting the media are analysed by *G. Šamanová*, who has focused her attention on the evolution of trust in the media and comparing trust in the media with that in political institutions. Compared with political institutions, media is in most cases considered more trustworthy. The author observes that while in other democratic countries the trust in media is similarly high, that of the Czech public stems from the perception of mass media as representatives of the public, independent sources and mediators of public discussion.

Third chapter is dedicated to Czech political parties, their development up until the way they are perceived by the public today. Current party system from the perspective of conflicting lines is the subject of contribution of *J. Červenka*, who presents a historical-genealogical evolution of Czech party system. In his analysis, he builds on historical-sociological approach focused on social origin of parties, which was successfully applied on Western European party systems by Lipset and Rokkan. Červenka describes the historical development of contradictions and party system in Czech Republic up until the reconstruction of the party system after 1989.

Party identification of Czech voters, evolution of party preferences, electoral background of parties and electoral motivation after the 2002 elections are subjects of an analysis by *D. Kunštát*.

Fourth chapter concentrates on foreign policy issues. *N. Horáková* analyses the evolution of citizens' opinion on Czech EU membership, attitudes towards European citizenship and faith in international organisations. In accordance with survey results, majority of Czech citizens have a positive perception of the EU and consider the membership a good thing.

D. Kunštát focuses his attention on Central European neighbourhood in the perspective of public opinion. The main topic of his paper is reflection of relationships with surrounding countries in Central Europe. The author notes that although the tradition of public opinion surveys concerning international and foreign policy issues is not long, it is possible to identify some general tendencies in the opinions of Czech citizens. One of them is the finding that majority of Czechs regard foreign policy problems as an exclusive issue and provide their government with the space to act according to their own decision. Another result shows that the executive powers have always, except for few exceptions, received the approval of public majority when it came to strategic intentions in the foreign policy field.

In the end of this chapter readers find *J. Červenka's* reflection of American foreign policy. The author says that based on public opinion surveys in the Czech

Republic, the interpretation of critical stance of large parts of the public as a manifestation of anti-Americanism is very dubious.

Final chapter represents a reflection of socio-economical topics. Once again, *J. Červenka* looks at public opinion and economic transformation in the Czech Republic. Analyses show that public attitudes toward economic transformations have developed in line with basic socio-economic trends.

Labour values and work attitudes of the Czech society are subjects of an analysis by *N. Horáková*. According to SPOR surveys, work is a highly appreciated value, along with family and relatives. Instrumental and social aspects of working life play an ever-increasing role in the Czech society. The most highly rated value within the Czech environment is a secure employment.

The reviewed publication presents a profile of the CPOR and provides readers with a complete overview of results acquired in continuous public opinion surveys, including wider social and historical context. This book is also a great inspiration for subjects carrying out long-term public opinion surveys in Slovakia.

Milan Zeman