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Citation for final published version:

Soo, Nikki, Anderson, Alexandra and Heywood-Heath, Charlie 2021. The promiscuous public? Exploring public opinion and why it matters to political actors. *Politics* 10.1177/02633957211007706 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/02633957211007706>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/02633957211007706>>

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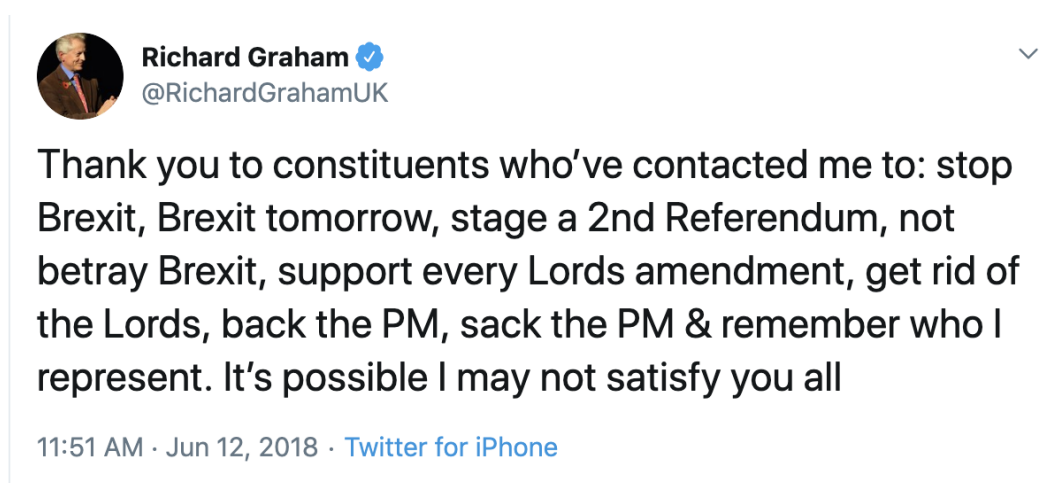


The Promiscuous Public? Exploring Public Opinion and Why It Matters to Political Actors

Political actors often cite public opinion to provide support for public policy decisions. This process is made more challenging with diverse demands and perspectives of the public. How then, do political actors decide which opinion gets heard? In this article, we go beyond the assumption that the practice of political representation is indistinguishable across various levels of political actors and ask, why do political actors value public opinion and how does it then influence the way in which they apply this information? Developing a multi-level approach, we employ semi-structured interviews with a wide range of political actors including politicians, pollsters and community activists. We find that motivations for defining and applying public opinion differs according to the hierarchy of political actors, demonstrating that the relationship between the public and political actors is more nuanced and complex than what is often depicted. In particular, we find that minority views play just as an important view in policymaking.

Keywords: Representation – Public opinion – Politicians – Interviews – Political Actors

Introduction



Tweet by Richard Graham MP, 12 Jun 2018, Twitter.

The difficulties representatives face in channelling diverse demands and perspectives of a capricious public into policy is well established in the literature (Kolln, 2015: 6; Urbinati and Warren, 2008: 389). In the above tweet by Richard Graham MP, a British Conservative politician representing Gloucester, we glimpse into these often at-odds requests from people with vastly diverging opinions. This article therefore seeks to explore how political actors

confront this challenge in asking: why do political actors value public opinion and subsequently, how does this value then influence the way in which they apply this information? In seeking to understand what the public wants and feels, previous studies have shown that political representatives and actors from different party backgrounds, policy positions, and organisations have long drawn on a variety of sources that tell them about public opinion, in bids to legitimise their policy positions and arguments (See, for example, Blumer, 1948; Burstein, 2003; Lewis, 2001). This article builds upon this notion by introducing a three-tiered framework for understanding the use and value of public opinion to different political actors, offering a new nuanced approach for future studies.

The public was declared ‘promiscuous’ by polling company ComRes founder Andrew Hawkins, as their voting preferences and behaviours are constantly changing and seemingly impossible to determine (The Guardian, 27 Sep 2019). The dilemma around Brexit, despite being extensively studied, reveals that there is no clear consensus around the value of public opinion. Gaps still remain as to why public opinion matters to different levels of political actors, especially in the variety of ways in which views from the public are understood, employed and migrated across multiple levels of political actors.

Looking to scholarly work on public opinion, we found a longstanding interest in the conceptualisation of public opinion in relation to polling but little consistency on how actors, apart from political elites, within the political system understood and applied it in practice. To address this, our study posed the following research question:

Why do political actors value public opinion and how does it then influence the way in which they apply this information?

In this paper we refer to political actors to mean those who hold political authority (formally or informally) to influence decisions, policies and outcomes. Contestations over who

belongs to this seemingly ever-changing group of political actors is widespread (Blumer, 1948; Burstein, 2003; McGregor, 2019). To this end, we created a three-tiered framework to focus on elite consumers of public opinion, meso-level producers of public opinion and grassroots level advocates of public views. In doing so we considered how public opinion is understood by varied actors, and how they sought to engage with this data within their own political tiers and the tiers below or above them. This article therefore seeks to offer a new understanding of public opinion through this unique three-tiered lens for future studies, extending existing analysis by exploring how those tasked with the advocacy, measurement and representation of public opinion perceive this phenomenon.

In adopting this approach, we found that how public opinion was interpreted and used was influenced by the hierarchical level of political actors. Due to the nature of their role, political actors in the top tier are unsurprisingly concerned with re-election, which will therefore affect their relationship with public opinion. Interestingly, we also found that the top tier was also more willing to use their own judgement, or that of experts, to supersede public opinion. The middle tier found their role as that of a ‘conduit’ of public opinion, where they aimed to fairly represent all views and then summarise them clearly for the tier above to do with what they will. Our research found that the bottom tier was especially focused with the views of the minority, ensuring that public opinion was never overridden and taken over with the views of the majority. This aim was especially apparent with issues of class, race and LGBTQ+.

Conceptualising and capturing the public’s opinion

Public opinion, broadly defined as “the number of people holding a certain opinion, and the people holding that opinion would be identified as belonging to the public” (Allport, 1937: 9), has historically been regarded as a central tenet within modern democracy. Whilst a

simple enough definition, public opinion has often been a “contested and malleable concept” (Herbst, 1998; 2). A critical form of presenting how citizens feel in relation to politicians, policy, and pressing issues that may impact their everyday lives, public opinion is often used by a variety of political actors to justify changes and implementation of policies, or to influence how citizens feel about important issues. James Bryce (1888) famously spoke of a ‘government by public opinion’ whereby the views held by the masses informed and influenced the decisions made by their representatives. Unlike former systems of governing, politicians were elected by the people (or sub-sections of the population at the time of writing) and therefore sought to satisfy the interests of the majority in their actions. Whilst elections are a popular form of public opinion, Bryce (1888) argued there were other ‘organs’ of public opinion used to gather views and feed into the actions of their political elite. Bryce believed that one of the problems with trying to discuss public opinion was that people confounded opinion with the organs used to gather it, assuming that one organ could speak for all of society. Stemming from Bryce’s work, current scholarship on public opinion has largely circled around three main discussions: 1) defining public opinion, 2) the different sources public opinion is drawn from, and 3) the impact of public opinion. Further to this, since Bryce’s 1888 conceptualisation, digital and technological advancement have resulted in the common use of social media data to express public opinion (Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2015), though its reliability and representativeness are questioned (McGregor, 2019, 2020). Whilst scholars predominantly share the view that public opinion is a social construct (Blumer, 1948; Herbst, 1993; Bourdieu, 1979; Burstein, 2003; Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2015; McGregor, 2019, 2020), attempts are still being made to define what public opinion is. The problem with trying to do so, as captured by Entman and Herbst, is that public opinion is merely “useful fiction” that can mean multiple things to different political actors (2001: p.203). Although providing a definitive answer to this contentious concept may be regarded as useful for guiding research, ‘knowing’ what public

opinion refers to is merely a process of framing – selecting, highlighting and disregarding different parts of reality (ibid).

A review of classical and contemporary literature on public opinion reveals a host of varying definitions. For instance, Blumer (1948) believes that the public is a diverse body of people, whereas public opinion is simply “society in operation” and therefore reflective of a small minority of powerful individuals (ibid: p.544). In contrast, Burstein (2003) rejects this concept by distinguishing between the public and powerful interest groups. Public opinion is therefore the accumulation of the public overall, and an indicator of majority opinion of ordinary people (ibid). McGregor (2019) also rejects that public opinion is as concentrated to one group as Blumer (1948) suggests. Instead public opinion is “forged by methods and data” (ibid: p.1), depending on who, what, where and how they are asked. Combining these views presents a conflicting understanding of public opinion, something Herbst (1993) clearly captures with the conceptualisations categorised into the following headings in Table 1.

>>> INSERT TABLE 1 HERE <<<

Along with the divergent views on public opinion comes a range of political actors who draw on the use of public opinion in a multitude of ways. Whilst the role of elites within the construction of public opinion is not novel within political science (Blumer, 1948; Burstein, 2003; Grant et al, 2010), research on them have almost always focused exclusively on the role of politicians. Scholarship on how elite leadership can affect political opinions reveal a variety of ways this can occur - such as influencing public opinion through their policy cues (Bullock, 2011), biased perceptions and actions on policy issues as a result of partisanship (Butler and Dynes, 2016; Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Jennings, 1992), or as Lewis (2001) describes, plainly doing what they want. Bennett and Entman (2005), however, make clear that those involved in the formation of public opinions are not a homogenous group and that a variety of perspectives must be considered. Similarly, Zaller (1992), who identifies other political actors

such as journalists, writers and trade unionists, recognises these actors as important as they also work with public opinion in order to influence decision-making, using their interpretations of public opinion to make claims on behalf of the public. More recently, in his detailed study of election polls in media coverage, Toff (2016) identifies how journalists in America can shape and represent public opinion through making assertions and projecting narratives. Appreciating the varying levels of power, status, and influence held by a variety of political actors paints a more nuanced picture of how public opinion interacts with politics.

Two crucial areas of public opinion scholarship are particularly neglected. First, the role of non-political elites, if any, in public opinion still remains mostly unknown. To extend our knowledge, we need to consider *all* political actors who produce, use, and represent public opinion in their work. Secondly, there is still little understanding about how those who represent public opinion (i.e. political actors) and the public opinion data is being used. How do political actors value public opinion, in what way do they value it, and how do they apply them? Specifically, we seek to find out the value of public opinion and how it is being used by a range of political actors by building on Herbst's work. Thus, this paper considers these dual dilemmas by fully exploring these practices from the perspectives of a range of political actors and clarify their views towards public opinion and how they apply it. Whether they be a politician, a pollster or a community activist, these political actors play a pivotal role within British politics and must therefore be recognised as key actors within the study of public opinion. Doing so will not only bring together a range of studies but demonstrate how there are differences across political actors' perspectives that can inform our understanding of the role and uses of public opinion.

Methods

Our study examines the perspective of various political actors and how they generally understand the public and public opinion. We were also keen to explore the perceived

importance of public opinion, and how it may subsequently inform the decisions political actors make when it feeds into their political lives (Quinn-Patton, 2001). Recognising the socially constructed nature of public opinion, we drew on semi-structured interviews as a method conducive to exploring perceived nuances and potential conflicts. It offered a reflexive, iterative data generation process as participants meaning and attitudes towards the public could be explored, rather than simply testing our own pre-assumptive beliefs as researchers (Byrne, 2004; Bryman, 2012; Furlong and Marsh, 2008).

Acknowledging the lack of attention given to the diversity of political actors in public opinion research as highlighted above, we approached sampling by identifying a wide of group political actors identified in the above literature (such as elected politicians, polling experts, think tank researchers and activists) who are known to use or produce public opinion. This approach echoes sentiments raised by Bennett and Entman (2005) who note how politicians rely on other political actors to ‘know’ what the public think without holding a direct relationship themselves. Based on this, we identified three tiers whose difference is characterised by their unique relationship with the public (see Figure 1). The rationale for these tiers are as follows:

1. *Top Tier* - Those who are formally elected to serve and represent the public, as it is these political actors whose interpretations of the public inform decision-making on behalf of the public. Examples of these include Members of Parliament and local councillors.
2. *Middle Tier* - those who are a part of an established organisation whose role includes producing and promoting public opinion in order to feed this into their work, such as researchers from polling organisations or think tank organisations.
3. *Bottom Tier* - Members of the public who try to encapsulate public opinion via their own work. These are individuals who attempt to construct a political narrative

through their own activism and interpretations. These include grassroots activists and community artists.

Our three-tiered approach builds on Herbst's concept of 'reified public opinion' in two ways. First, based on existing understanding how political elites use public opinion, we assume each tier interprets public opinion differently. This means, according to their own views and biases, each tier has their own methods and practices of gathering public opinion (i.e. 'created from descriptions'). Second, the ways in which political actors either receive or move public opinion to and from other tiers (if at all) allows us to conceptualise and understand a more nuanced way of examining the ways in which public opinion is interpreted.

>>> INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE <<<

Within the limitations of our preliminary project, we selected the regions of London, Yorkshire, Edinburgh and Glasgow as they are important sites of institutional politics and the most populous counties in the UK. This would allow us to generate hypotheses that can be applied and tested in other UK cities. We then identified potential interview participants based in these four cities from the three groups identified (see Table 2). Throughout data collection, we also snowballed our sample by asking interviewees to suggest potential participants. In total, we contacted 86 potential participants, with 24 of them agreeing to be interviewed, thus forming our sample (Table 2).

>>> INSERT TABLE 2 HERE <<<

Interviews with participants were conducted in person as far as possible, with interviews with Scottish participants done over the phone. With the participants' consent, these interviews were recorded. Adhering to ethical guidelines and protection of their identity, the names and any identifying details of participants have been anonymised. The semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour, were carried out by two members of the research team from June till July 2019. The interviews began with asking

participants how they conceptualised the term ‘public’. Participants were then asked about the importance of public opinion; sources of public opinion; the role of digital media; and finally, the challenges of studying public opinion.

As with most exploratory work, analysis was carried out through an iterative process. After recorded interviews were transcribed, the software Nvivo was used in order to code the data, using a list of 15 coding words (or nodes) that were developed in a two-step process. An initial list of nodes was developed deductively using Bryce’s concepts of hierarchy across organs, Blumer’s argument on role of elites in public opinion, as well as our interview questions. The list of nodes also included: qualitative and speaking with people; influencing or influence; function of public opinion; expertise. The coding words were refined as we inductively added nodes based on themes that emerged from interview responses. Responses were subsequently categorised into nodes during analysis.

Findings

In this section we reveal the perspectives found between the different hierarchies with the aim of improving future research on the relationship between political actors and public opinion, and how public opinion is interpreted, moved and shifted across the different tiers of political actors.

Top Tier

Political actors in the top tier, as elected political representatives, emphasised the importance of seeking out public opinion to responsibly carry out their duties. The difficulty in representing a large and variegated population emerged quickly in our interview findings. For political actors in the top tier, the public they refer to mostly meant their constituents. The challenges in understanding the public’s views were apparent, particularly from a top-down perspective. These actors faced 5 different challenges in their interactions with public opinion: i) the public

consist of their constituents and not always the UK as a whole, ii) they must ensure that minority views are not lost, iii) they use their own views to interpret public opinion; iv) they must sometimes take the advice of experts to support the best interests of the public, even if these interests are not what the public desires, and finally v) they must ensure that they are re-elected which means supporting majority views.

Most top tier political actors recognised that a majoritarian view of public opinion may only reflect the portion of society with the loudest voices, and not those who may need the most help or representation. Often, minority voices and the challenges they face can go unheard, undermining democracy in the prioritisation of direct legislation (e.g. Gamble, 1997). To illustrate, the following local councillor explains the need to balance between the majority and minority:

As an elected representative you have to form a view of majority and minority view. You have to see if it's a legitimate interest because there's minority views who don't agree with a multicultural society which would not be a legitimate interest from our view... We bring our set of perspectives and our political views, we then want to balance with those people we represent. (personal communication, 15 July, 2019)

As such, there is a need to enable multiple voices to be heard while trying to understand these public views. Ensuring as many views are represented in public opinion is important as populations are increasingly diverse with varying experiences and perspectives. The inclusion of different views and fresh perspectives can also shed light on issues and experiences representatives are often not privy to, which can help contribute to policy debates. For instance, the following MP expresses,

It's not easy for politicians to look at a particular issue... I might have a view on it. But there are many constituents who have a completely different idea, or fresh perspective to bring to that debate... the general public can bring the evidence to the table in a rather refreshing way. (personal communication, 19 July, 2019)

Ensuring that these majority and minority opinions are heard can also result in tensions during policymaking. In recognising that public opinion does not always dictate decision-

making, those in the top tier referenced using public opinion as a good starting point to gauge popular political issues amongst their voters. Respondents indicated a preference for intimate face-to-face discussions when understanding public opinion, such as the following MP, who cited this allowed him to “*get the views of the people that you represent, but not necessarily voted for you*” (personal communication, 5 July, 2019). Public opinion served to legitimise the decisions of politicians and inform them of how they could act on more salient matters (Page and Shapiro, 1983; Burstein, 2003). Particularly, in relation to earning votes for future elections, public opinion served as a barometer of wider society and the sort of decisions that politicians could enact during their time in office. Whilst one politician admitted that you cannot “*govern by public opinion*” (personal communication, 1 July, 2019), there was still a recognition that understanding what the electorate thought on key topics helped them prepare for upcoming elections and attempt to be in-tune with those who voted them into power as “*obviously politics is a type of popularity contest and being in tune with the public mood is important for votes*” (personal communication, 11 July, 2019).

When politicians did choose to include public opinion data to inform their policymaking, knowing when and what to include when integrating public opinion into decision-making was of significant importance to them. Rather than only adhering solely to what they conceived to be public opinion, they deemed it necessary to use alongside other types of research and understanding of the issue to inform decision making. As the following representative describes, “*You should navigate yourself through public opinion but also what you think is right. You can't make yourself a hostage to public opinion*” (personal communication, 1 July, 2019). It was made additionally harder with various sources of public opinion, including social media, as the following MP explained:

At a macro level it's much more difficult to ascertain public opinion, it's filtered down through social media, it's filtered through the editorial process of broadcast and print media. And you have to weigh that carefully. Because otherwise you could be carried away

on a way that turned out to be false direction. And underpinning all of that, is your own values, your beliefs, your own the things that you believe and that you want to persuade others to go along with. (personal communication, 18 July, 2019)

As expressed in the last sentence quoted from the MP, the tension top tier political actors experience between what they perceive as important in comparison to what the public is bringing to their attention is not often discussed, and is a key factor in how public opinion is being used, interpreted and presented. To make decisions, the utilisation of opinions given to some top tier political actors depended on their own motivation for capturing opinion and whose interests they thought needed attention. For example, one politician drew on a prime example of LBGTQ+ rights, explaining that whilst these rights may not reflect majority opinion and support, it was an important position to champion and respond to, with MPs acting “*on the views of a vocal minority*” (personal communication, 5 July, 2019). While clearly a minority, giving voice to the LBGTQ+ community was perceived to be a crucial undertaking for the greater public. Similarly, a Member of Scottish Parliament interviewed emphasised that one could not make decisions purely by public opinion, or direct democracy, as this could ignore the voice of the few. Bringing in subject matter experts also enabled representatives to take public opinion into account at their own discretion, and make a decision that they ultimately viewed as best for the population: “*The alcohol tax was criticised and obviously ordinary people are not going to want to pay more for their alcohol, but what we did there was listen to experts and think about their best interest and sometimes you have to do that and we have to do the right thing*” (personal communication, 1 July 2019). Whilst challenging to make sense of public views alongside their own political views, elected representatives in the top tier demonstrate that public opinion may not always direct policy decisions that are necessarily supported by the majority of the demographic involved.

Along with balancing the responsibilities of their role with opinions of both majority and minority groups expressed by constituents, representatives also mentioned that

understanding the perspectives of their constituents was important to their re-election. As their re-election is often dependent on ‘speaking for’ the public and how well constituents perceive them to be achieving this, those in the top tier rely on public opinion to develop favourable policies that will in turn mean they will be re-appointed. As the following MP expressed, *“ultimately we all need to be re-elected, so we have to strike a balance between our own views, public opinion and the practical steps required to actually achieve change. How much weight you give to public views versus your own might also be influenced by the size of your majority”* (personal communication, 19 June 2019). With this quote we can also see the role that their own personal views play in the way the top tier aims to serve the public, where it can take a great ‘amount’ of public views to supplant their own. The pressure of re-election plays a key part in this process as re-election often can be guaranteed by majority support. Similarly, the following representative evaluates his personal electoral record, saying, *“[MPs] would want to be in sync with public opinion in their constituencies or indeed, the country... I guess I must be fairly effective at representing the majority public view in my constituency. And I have been successfully re-elected six times since 1997”* (personal communication, 5 July 2019). Thus, we observe how representatives are influenced by various motives when it comes to their use, interpretation and representation of public opinion.

Middle Tier

Political actors who fell into the middle tier, namely polling experts and think tank researchers, presented a general consensus that public opinion does not reflect or apply to all members of the public as a whole. Instead, public opinion was the diverse opinion of a diverse populous that they then must justify into clear data and findings for the top tier. In this sense, the middle tier plays the crucial role of the conduit between the public and elite political actors (top tier). One interviewee explained this as, *“There is no such thing as public opinion. The public is not one group with one voice. It’s lot of people, different voices, with different opinions... If we*

start talking on behalf of the public, that can go down quite dangerous routes.” (personal communication, 21 June, 2019). One of the ways this could happen, explains a polling expert, is depicted in how Brexit has played out: *“Take Brexit for example, that's a classic case of using the public to justify things without really understanding what that actually means or going further. Not just between the 52/48% but also understanding what public opinion actually meant within the 52% or 48%”* (personal communication, 21 June, 2019). As can be seen with this quote, rather than attempting to condense a wide range of opinions into a single notion, middle tier participants perceived the importance of interpreting and presenting a wide spectrum of varied public sentiments. One of the ways pollsters do this is to consider a particular segment of the population. Taking young citizens for example, the following pollster expresses the importance of listening to the excluded or the minority in the following quote,

We want to try and help promote and further amplify a specific section of public opinion which we currently don't feel are being heard...specifically young people. So public opinion matters in that right now our understanding of public opinion isn't reflective of the country, and we want to try and change that. (personal communication, 11 July 2019)

When asked why public opinion mattered, many participants from the middle tier expressed the need for multiple views of the public to be understood, shared, and heard. They sought public opinion in order to engage the public within the political processes and inform decision-making. They revealed a more systematic approach to seeking out public opinion that reflected the diverse people and perspectives that make up the public. Recognising that politics can sometimes be isolated from the general public, middle-tier political actors were keen to involve the public in decision-making in order to improve the decisions made by politicians. For example, the following interviewee explained,

What we find to be important in civil society might not be the same priorities as those individuals in the public... once you've got that you can translate it into more technical speak... something which wouldn't necessarily be done directly between that individual person and government official. (personal communication, 21 June, 2019)

As observed, the middle tier sought to reflect the variegation of the public that emerges through polling as they share their findings with political actors who may use their work in policy. An important aspect of this work is that of translation in order to facilitate the clear communication of opinion between public individuals and government officials (top tier).

To those in the middle tier, public opinion was considered to be a valuable source of understanding what ‘ordinary’ people felt was important to them. Middle tier experts would then translate these views and opinions into effective language for the top tier of political actors. Notably, the role of conduit for political opinion between the top tier and other members of the public emerged as an important explanation as to why public opinion was necessary. As a think tank researcher expresses, *“People in power are still part of the public, they're still part of the community. It should be more about collaborating together”* (personal communication, 28 May, 2019). Similarly, his colleague shares, *“I think you can't separate politicians with everyday people who are affected by decisions and their lives. It shouldn't just be politicians that make decisions, it should be everyday people that help make those decisions”* (personal communication, 1 July, 2019). Perspectives, particularly those from the minority that are often lost to the majority view, are still part of the wider community and need to be heard through collaboration and consultation. This was viewed as a particularly important responsibility by the middle tier.

Linking their work to politicians in particular, the middle tier shared that public opinion was able to reveal a myriad of perspectives often forgotten or not discussed during policymaking and debates, as explained by an interviewee: *“What we have tried to do is link much better to normal people, ordinary people, and what the public prioritize and think are important, because what we find to be important in civil society might not be the same priorities as those of individuals in the public”* (personal communication, 21 June, 2019). In this sense,

some politicians may find public opinion to be an important gauge in developing their campaign and the issues they choose to emphasise as it could impact the way members of the public vote. Keeping abreast of the variety of views “*may influence the point when people actually express that vision through the ballot box*” (personal communication, 21 June, 2019). Outside of election time, public opinion also could be used to monitor changes to contemporary views relating to the political issues happening in real time. The following interviewee used Brexit as an example, explaining how the consistent polling means that the public’s varied views are being brought to attention,

I think politicians recognise that they will be held accountable... If you look at all the demonstration about Brexit... people are just generally annoyed. And I think it's our job to make sure we continue the polling, continue the groups, continue talking to these people and get out as much as possible. And so that... The rest of the public can talk about it. (personal communication, 1 July, 2019).

The role of the conduit can be seen in this quote, where the middle tier views themselves as morally responsible for ensuring varied and changing voices are heard, observed as well as understood, by the top tier. As observed by the middle tier, whilst politicians might appear to be representing the public and their views, regular polling not only ensured public views to be monitored outside of election results, whilst it also fostered and promoted a wide range of public perspectives to be included in the understanding of public opinion.

Bottom Tier

Political actors that fell within the bottom tier, such as journalists, activists, and artists, demonstrated a closer relationship with the public and public opinion. There emerged a particular prominent sense of connection to the perspectives of marginalised communities or particular groups in society such as ethnic minorities, youth, and the LBGTQ+ community.

Amongst the bottom tier, it would seem that understanding public opinion was driven by an authentic purpose, in that it involved breaking down existing social barriers. Bottom tier

activists are aware that their experiences and methods serve to highlight and showcase the experiences of the public as they interact with them. As the following journalist working for a national newspaper in the UK explains,

You can never have a representative reflection of the public... I wouldn't claim to say that I'm making some kind of objective or definitive representation on the place for a person or a snapshot... The onus is on us as journalists to be clear about what exactly we are representing (personal communication, 8 July, 2019).

In their aim for authenticity, this quote demonstrates how the bottom tier uses transparency in order to accurately engage, and then represent, public opinion. In this sense, these actors were accurately aware that they cannot responsibly claim to make known views known of the majority, but instead must clearly articulate how they come to these opinions and the ways they have chosen to present them.

Political actors in this tier asserted that public opinion was often ignored in the dominant political discourse and that there were inherent benefits to hearing views from a varied range of people: *“For the healthy functioning of society people from across the social and geographical spectrum should be able to voice their opinions and be heard”* (personal communication, 8 July, 2019). It is therefore the diversity of voices and opinion that is important to the bottom tier, rather than that of a majority.

Whilst it was clear that the use of public opinion did not always direct a bottom tier political actors' final decision, some believed that in order for public opinion to be used effectively, it had to reflect the majority opinion. One activist interviewed summarised this argument as: *“We can't do much else without the majority... it's a naive argument to think you can just piss off the rest of the public”* (personal communication, 5 July, 2019). This is an interesting contradiction as this tier reported to be better at incorporating the public opinion of marginal groups but simultaneously more attentive to the importance of majority opinion. In

this sense, the bottom tier sought to gain the support of the majority in order to ensure the voice of the minority was heard.

Discussion

In the creation of a three-tiered framework where we identified a top, middle and bottom tier, our study demonstrates a new nuanced understanding of the relationship between political actors and public opinion, and the ways in which this varies and moves across political levels. In answering our research question “Why do political actors value public opinion and how does this value then influence the way in which they apply this information?”.. We identified i) what motivates political actors to use public opinion; ii) How do the various level of political actors interpret public opinion; iii) how does this then affects the ways in which political actors apply public opinion and move public opinion through the tiers, if they do at all. Although there were consistencies across the three tiers in how political actors interpreted and valued the majority and minority view, our research reveals some fundamental differences in how different tiers understood public opinion, their motivations for gathering it and how they applied these opinions to their work.

>> INSERT TABLE 3 <<

All three tiers were similarly aware that understanding public opinion meant sensitively navigating the perspectives of a very diverse population. Although it can be tempting to regard public opinion as the same as majority opinion, this oversimplification was dismissed by political actors across all tiers. As interviewees noted, what can be perceived as ‘majority opinion’ often mainly captures the views of the loudest or have greater access to the platforms for expressing opinion (e.g. Bourdieu, 1979; Blumer, 1948). Political actors were just as sceptical as to which voice made up public opinion and recognised that a majoritarian

approach, whilst the easiest form of conceptualisation, risked reflecting perspectives that were not truly public.

The varied approaches by political actors reflected an understanding of the public aligned with Herbst's (1993) understanding of 'reified public opinion'. Whilst the term 'public' was constantly referenced by both interviewers and interviewees, differences between tiers became apparent when it came to the actual interpretation and application of public opinion (Table 3). Top tier actors, as elected political actors with significant political authority, view their role as 'speaking on behalf of' the public and emphasise the heterogeneity of the population. As observed from the quote above from a local councillor (see p.14), representatives risk making themselves hostages to public opinion. The tension between knowing what the public has opined, and deciding what to do with it, ultimately rests on what the representative views as imperative at that point in time. As mentioned, Entman and Herbst (2001) have alluded to these very actions when political actors highlight, select and frame certain views in the way they decide to utilise public opinion. Top tier political actors' use of public opinion in their work also strongly depended on their desire to be re-elected, along with a need to balance a variety of views and resources. In contrast, middle tier actors, through their polling work, often drew on representative sampling to express the views of both the majority and the minority, acting as conduit between the top tier and the public itself. The middle tier sought to apply public opinion in as collaboratively as possible, in order to present policymakers with a full idea of what the public may be thinking and feeling. This differed from political actors in the top tier, who seemed to rely on their own opinion to gauge the importance of varying opinions, and subsequently using those instead. On the other hand, bottom tier actors instead tended to focus on one particular subgroup or community, showcasing in smaller samples how decisions made at a macro-level might impact those on the ground. These varying uses and interpretations of public opinion are important when

considering the impact of representation as it suggests there is not a consistent use of public opinion across the political hierarchy. This is especially important for the top tier, as the role of the majority will play a much more significant part as it is inherently necessary for re-election, for which the middle and bottom tier do not have to consider.

The middle and bottom tier play significant roles in helping top tier political actors listen and interpret data about public views. These tiers help translate public opinion for the top tier, ensuring both the majority and minority have a voice, thus instructing and informing the decisions of the top tier. As the following middle tier interviewee reveals, “*Many times it's not wanting to change the public opinion but change the elite opinion*” (personal communication, 1 July, 2019). This view is not surprising considering the nature of the role of middle tier actors in think tanks and polling organisations. The purpose of a think tank, as defined by Strobe Talbot, President of the Brookings Institution, is to ‘conduct[s] research on policy issues and then make[s] its recommendations available to policymakers, opinion leaders, and the citizenry’ (Talbot, 2007: p.82). The application of public opinion by political actors across the tiers is therefore related to the way they viewed their role in facilitating and communicating what the people want. Middle and bottom tiers have similar views about sharing perspectives from different segments of society, with the middle tier acting as a direct conduit, and the bottom tier as an indirect channel, for public opinion between the public and the political actors in the top tier. Our multi-level framework (see Figure 1) thus sheds light on ‘how’ political actors gathered public opinion by examining how public opinion moves through the different levels of political actors.

Our three-tiered hierarchical approach to understanding political actors and public opinion is beneficial in that it demonstrates that members of the public might not always contact

top tier political representatives directly, but instead may seek a relationship through middle or bottom tier political actors. Our findings also shed light on the desire of politicians to have a direct relationship with the public whilst recognising the difficulty in achieving a balanced connection with voters. Thus, politicians do not necessarily prefer having a detached relationship with the public, as suggested by Bennett and Entman (2005), but appreciate the input of other political actors from various levels who have the resources and means to engage with diverse members of the public. Likewise, the public too may prefer engaging with different tiers of political actors, demonstrating that representation goes beyond a member of the public's direct relationship with the top tier political elite.

As an exploratory study, our research does bear some limitations. Our sampling of political actors from the three levels in our tiered framework is modest and only uncovers findings from political actors located in four key areas in England and Scotland. Widening the geographical area of participants would allow us to test findings generated from our initial sites of research, establishing in greater detail, insights into the roles of different political actors. Nonetheless, in presenting this new hierarchy of political actors, this preliminary study shows that it is not only important to consider how the public interact with political actors but also how political actors interact with each other. These varying levels of interaction are significant because they help develop an understanding of how the public may come to appear in the decisions and actions of the political elite. Although the public might not always interact directly with top tier political actors, they may still have influence through their engagement with other tiers. Recognising the nuances that manifest within the relationship between the public and the political elite through the three tiers reinforces further the importance of studying this field of politics by setting a new research agenda. We would recommend further research on how the relationship between the political actors from the middle and bottom tiers is conducted, especially in their role as conduits of public opinion to the top tier. In this sense,

the effect of public opinion on informing and directing policymaking could be further understood and quantified. The multiple levels of political actors can offer opportunities for understanding how Herbst's 'reified public opinion' affects policy at national and local level, and how different groups, especially marginalised groups, are able to influence policy and political change, if at all.

To conclude, this paper has begun addressing questions around the extent to which the public features in decision-making and what representations of public opinion look like. Building on Herbst's (1993) conceptualisation of what public opinion may refer to, this study has further highlighted how public opinion is interpreted and understood by political actors at various levels. As we have discovered in our exploration, political actors across all tiers believe there is more nuance to understanding public opinion and that acting in the interests of the public may occasionally mean overriding the wishes of the majority. Importantly, our paper sheds light on how the perspective of political actors themselves need to be considered in order to deepen the knowledge of how public opinion is understood and used in practice. By identifying a hierarchy amongst political actors and grouping them into three distinct tiers, this study has revealed that political actors differ in the way they conceptualise public opinion and how they then apply this interpretation of public opinion to their work. Our study has expanded beyond current scholarly knowledge of political elites, drawing attention to the need to study the various political actors who gather, construct and share public opinion up through to these elites. Within a chaotic political environment demonstrated by Brexit and the Covid-19 crisis, our exploratory findings could help highlight a possible explanation as to why so many people are unsatisfied with political elites claiming to listen to, and represent, the people.

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Table 1. Herbst's (1993) Four Conceptualisations of Public Opinion.

Conceptualisations of Public Opinion	Description
Aggregate Public Opinion	Public opinion could be defined as the overall sum of opinions expressed through polls, surveys, elections, etc.
Majoritarian Public Opinion	Some may see it as the voice of the majority of people within society. However, as Bryce (1888) recognised, public opinion may not reflect the majority of views in society but rather the views that are able to be heard and expressed without suppression or difficulty.
Discursive Public Opinion	Unlike the aggregation principle, public opinion is not static and evolves through public discourse. Thus, public opinion is something which develops when people communicate with each other
Reified Public Opinion	This view wholly rejects the above constructions of public opinion, seeing it as a fictional entity that is created from the descriptions of the media, policy and academic elites. Interestingly, Herbst's study concluded this was the most commonly expressed view of public opinion.

Table 2. List of Participants' Background and Number Interviewed.

<u>Tier</u>	<u>Who was Interviewed?</u>	<u>Number</u>
Top	Member of Parliament	5
	Councillor	2
	Lord Mayor	1
	Member of the House of Lords	1
	Member of the Scottish Parliament	1
Middle	Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)	2
	Pollsters	2
	Political Charities	3
Bottom	Actors	1
	Artists	2
	Writers	1
	Grassroots activists	3

Table 3. Table of Findings Across the Three Tiers

	Top “<i>The Elected</i>”	Middle “<i>The Conduit</i>”	Bottom “<i>The Advocate</i>”
<i>What motivates political actors to use public opinion?</i>	Use political opinion in order to serve their constituents, the public good, the country as a whole	Present policymakers with a full idea of what the public may be thinking and feeling	Ensure the voices of the macro-level are heard.
<i>How do the various level of political actors interpret public opinion?</i>	Often use the middle and bottom tier political actors to receive public opinion, and use their opinion on public opinion to decide what to do.	Gather public opinion in as collaboratively and impartially as possible.	Gather the views of the minority as well the majority, often emphasizing the voice of the few who are at risk of being marginalized.
<i>How does this then affects the ways in which political actors apply public opinion?</i>	Public opinion moves into policy change but not directly across tiers.	Public opinion is shared with Top Tier, therefore fulfilling role as ‘The Conduit’	Gather in greater numbers to exert more influence to the middle and top tier.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of political actors interviewed.

