

Public Opinion Against Individual Rights: The Role of Public Opinion Research

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Outline

- ✦ The role of public opinion research.
- ✦ Context of the study: Sequence of events.
- ✦ Which model of what is happening?
Changing minds or changing sides?
- ✦ Which questions are asked, which questions are not asked?
- ✦ Two tests of the relationship between opinion on policy and voting intention
- ✦ Conclusion: What is the role of public opinion research/researchers?

What is the role of public opinion research?

- ✦ When there is a heated debate on a policy,
 - ✦ Survey questions tend to be standard and ask about support for the policy, sometimes for specific elements of the policy, nothing more.
 - ✦ A story is then told about the characteristics of those who are pro and con.
- ✦ Survey results contribute to portray both sides as homogenous.
- ✦ Media tend to “buy” the story that support for a policy will lead to vote for a specific party, the so-called “wedge issue” that will determine election results.

The Quebec Charter of values: Sequence of events

- ✦ A first series of events occurred in 2007-2008:
 - ✦ **A poll on racism and tolerance** sponsored by two major media asked questions about whether the wearing of hijabs, kippa, etc. was “acceptable”.
 - ✦ The “theme” is recuperated by a right-wing third party, ADQ, who manages to gain the status of official opposition in the following March 2007 election while Parti Québécois, the sovereigntist party, finishes third.
 - ✦ A Commission is set up on what is called “reasonable accommodations” of religion-based requests from various groups.
 - ✦ The Commission meets with people throughout Quebec and with experts, and hand out a report in May 2008.
 - ✦ The report is “tabled” and the elected Liberal government does not act on its recommendations.

The Quebec Charter of values: Sequence of events

- ✦ September 2012: Election of Parti Québécois as a *minority* government
- ✦ March 2013: **PQ gouvernement conducts a survey** focusing on the wearing of religious signs, reasonable accommodations, and the role of the Government on these issues.
 - ✦ The goal is to use support for a policy to gain enough support to form a *majority* government.
- ✦ August 2013: The proposed policy is leaked to the media.
- ✦ September 2013: Formal presentation of the policy followed by a web consultation.
- ✦ August 2013 to March 2014: **Public polls** on support for the GVT policy.
- ✦ March 4, 2014: Election called for April 7. Parti Québécois is defeated with 25% of the vote, its worst result since 1976.

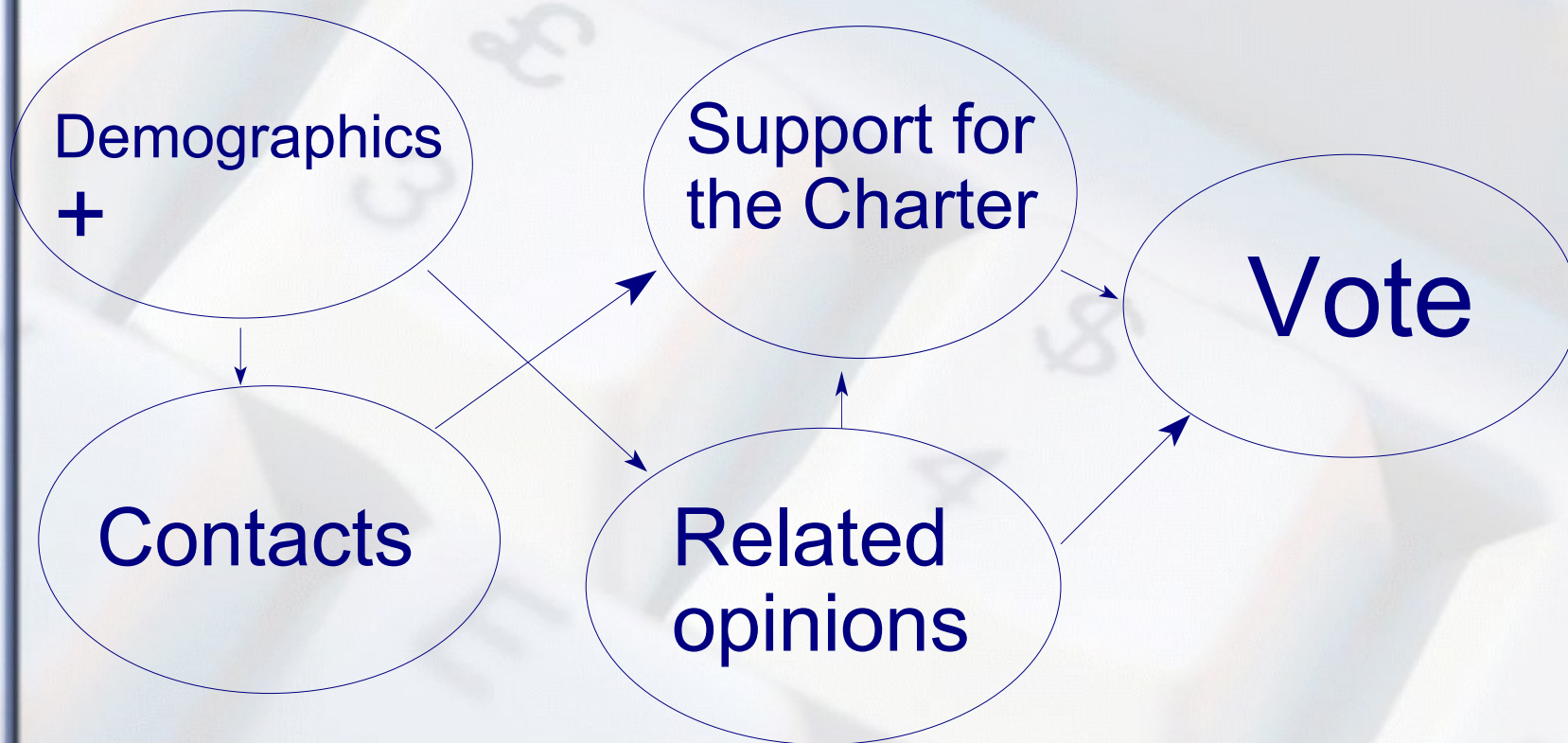
What is the proposed policy about?

- ✦ The proposed “Charter of Quebec Values” comprises 5 elements:
 - ✦ Amend the Charter of rights to limit religion-based accommodations.
 - ✦ Duty of neutrality and reserve for all public employees.
 - ✦ **Prohibit wearing of *conspicuous* religious signs (cross, hijab, kippa,...) by public employees.**
 - ✦ Mandatory to have one’s face uncovered when providing or receiving services from the state.
 - ✦ Establish an implementation policy for reasonable accommodations.

The story as it is told

- ✦ French-speaking Quebeckers who live outside major cities are not used to diversity.
- ✦ Therefore, they are reluctant to accept diversity and...
- ✦ They will vote for a party who acts on stopping reasonable accommodations i.e., requests from “strangers” to get “special treatment”.
 - ✦ “They come here, they should live like us”.
- ✦ Parti Québécois will benefit and be able to form a majority government.

The media & political leaders model

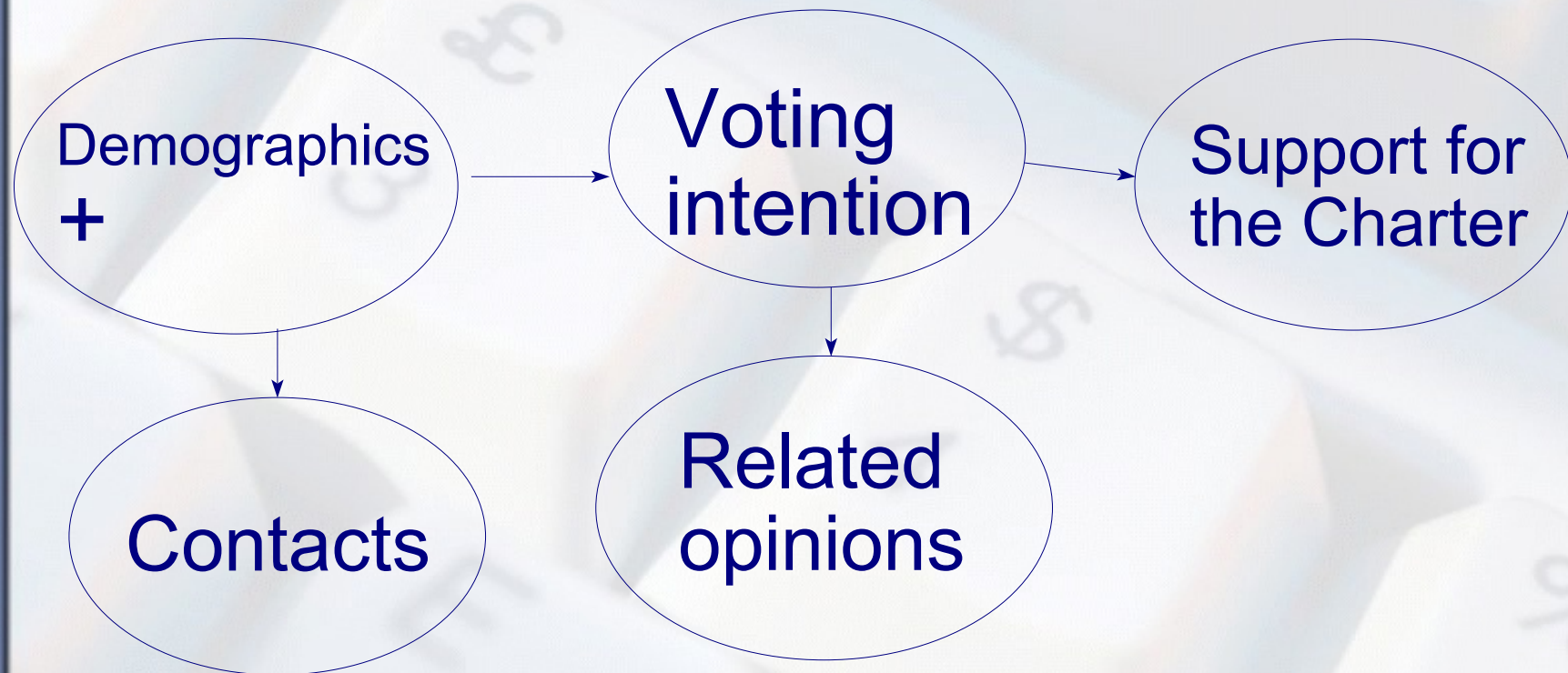


People live in a non-diversified environment that leads them to have opinions that will lead them to vote for a specific party (the revisionist model, Carsey&Layman, 2006)

The possible real story

- ✦ Some people intend to vote for Parti Québécois, a nationalist party.
- ✦ The Parti Québécois leadership tells them that it is important to limit the freedom to wear religious signs (mostly those of non-christian religions).
- ✦ In the name of
 - ✦ Equality between men and women.
 - ✦ And the protection of “Quebec values”.
- ✦ People who trust the Parti Québécois leadership are confident that it proposes a policy that is right and necessary.

What if the model were the following?



The leadership of the political parties lead their supporters' opinions on specific policies

(The Michigan model, Carsey&Layman, 2006).

Which questions are asked in the public polls?

Do they allow to test the “story”?

✦ Typical:

- ✦ “The government has proposed a bill that would...., Would you say you very much agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or very much disagree with the proposed bill?
- ✦ Do you very much agree, somewhat agree,.. With the following elements of the proposed bill? - Wearing of religious signs by public employees.

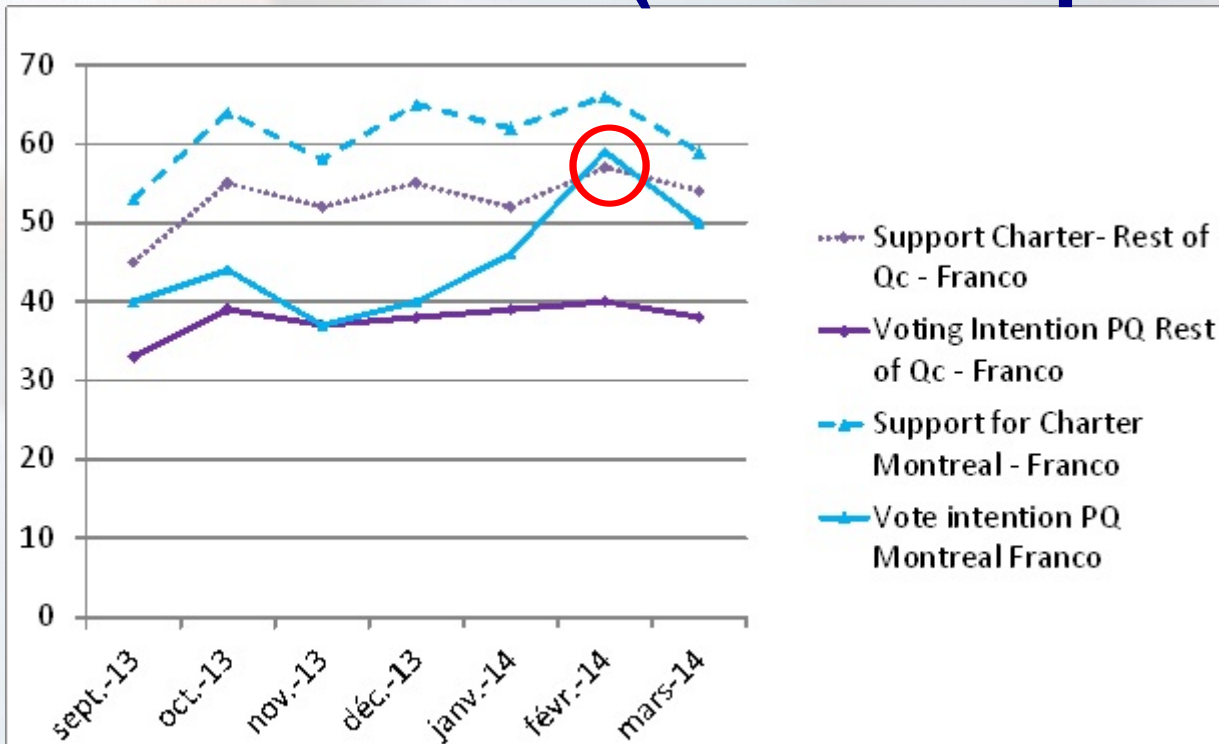
✦ Rare:

- ✦ Detailed questions regarding opinions on individual rights, freedom of religion & immigration, values, contact with diversity, **real-life consequences of the policy**.

✦ Absent:

- ✦ Religious practice, support for equality between men and women (one of the supposed grounds for the Charter).

What happened from Sept. 2013 to Mar. 2014 (French speakers only)



- ✦ Support for Charter
- ✦ Higher in Montreal
- ✦ Always higher than support for PQ.

After October 2013, support for the Charter & for the Parti Québécois are stable except for a substantial increase in support for PQ in the Montreal region in February 2014.

Testing the story

The data

- ✦ Two polls carried by CROP, in September 2013 and February 2014, asking,
 - ✦ Support for the proposed *Charter of Quebec values*
 - ✦ Opinion regarding religion, individual rights, secularism (2013)
 - ✦ Opinion regarding immigration (2013 & 2014)
 - ✦ Opinion regarding different minority groups (2014)
 - ✦ Measures of contact with Muslims & with public employees who wear religious signs (2014).
 - ✦ Voting intention (2013 & 2014) and support for Quebec sovereignty (2013).

What is the contribution of voting intention on support for the Charter?

	Sept.2013	Feb. 2014	VI before opinions	Sept 2013	Feb 2014
Age-scol-occ>	2.6%	2.1%		2.6%	2.1%
Region	0.2%	0.7%		0.2%	0.7%
Contacts	N/A	1.0%		N/A	1.0%
VI (+sovr)	28.6%	21.2%	Rel. opinions	10.1%	9.7%
Rel. opinions	6.6%	6.6%	VI (+sovr)	25.1%	18.1%
Total (adj.)	37.0%	30.1%		37.0%	30.1%

- ✦ **Voting intention is the main contributor.**
- ✦ **Related opinions, second best contributor:**
 - ✦ Sept 2013: attitude re: religion as heritage, immigration.
 - ✦ Feb. 2014: attitude re: different ethnic groups, immigration
- ✦ **Region & Contacts are not significant.**

What is the contribution of support for the Charter on intention to vote for Parti Québécois?

	Sept.2013	Feb. 2014	VI before opinions	Sept 2013	Feb 2014
Age-scol-occup	2.2%	1.8%		2.2%	1.8%
Region	0.3%	2.0%		0.3%	2.0%
Contacts	N/A	1.5%		N/A	1.5%
Support Charter	22.2%	16.1%	Rel. opinions	0.7%	1.2%
Rel. opinions	0.9%	0.1%	Support Charter	22.3%	15.6%
Total (adj.)	24.7%	20.5%		24.7%	20.5%

- ✦ **Support for the Charter is the main contributor.**
- ✦ **Feb. 2014: Montreal +, young people -.**
- ✦ **Related opinions:**
 - ✦ **Sept. 2013: opinion re immigration**
 - ✦ **Feb. 2014: Contacts with Muslims only.**

What is the contribution of support for the Charter on intention to vote for the Liberal Party of Quebec?

	Sept.2013	Feb. 2014	VI before opinions	Sept 2013	Feb 2014
Age-scol-occup	6.3%	2.1%		6.3%	2.1%
Region	1.0%	1.0%		1.0%	1.0%
Contacts	N/A	0.3%		N/A	0.3%
Support Charter	13.1%	13.1%	Rel. opinions	2.1%	0.8%
Rel. opinions	1.2%	0.4%	Support Charter	12.3%	12.6%
Total (adj.)	20.7%	15.2%		20.7%	15.2%

- ✦ **Support for the Charter is the main contributor.**
- ✦ **Feb. 2014: Montreal -, old people +.**
- ✦ **Related opinions:**
 - ✦ **Sept. 2013: opinion re religion as heritage**
 - ✦ **Feb. 2014: Contacts with Muslims only.**

What is the contribution of support for the Charter on intention to vote for the Coalition Avenir Quebec?

	Sept.2013	Feb. 2014	VI before opinions	Sept 2013	Feb 2014
Age-scol-occup	2.8%	2.1%		2.8%	2.1%
Region	0.8%	0.4%		0.8%	0.4%
Contacts	N/A	0.3%		N/A	0.3%
Support Charter	1.1%	0.0%	Rel. opinions	1.3%	1.4%
Rel. opinions	1.4%	1.5%	Support Charter	1.2%	0.2%
Total (adj.)	5.0%	2.5%		5.0%	2.5%

✦ Almost no impact:

✦ Education (2014)

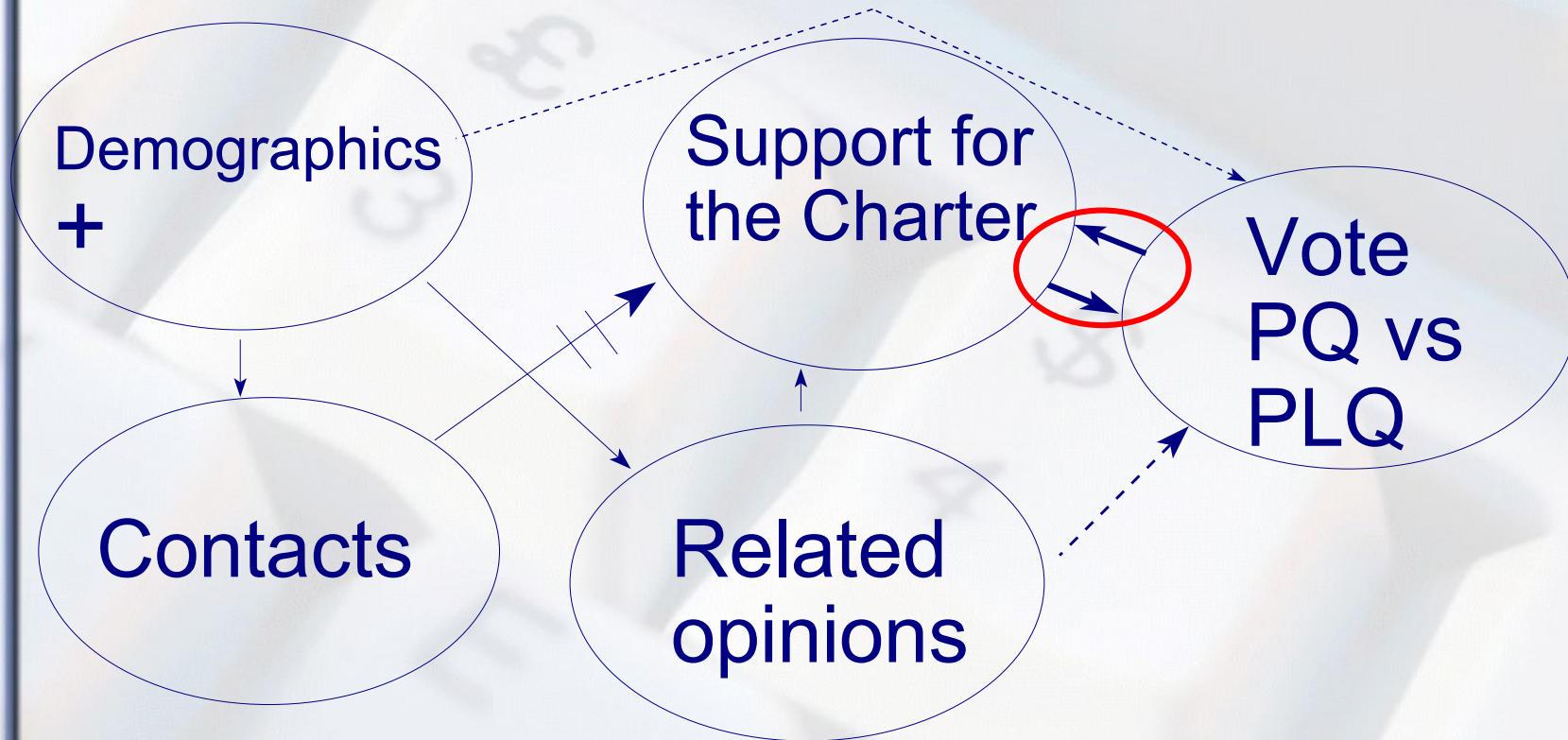
✦ Sept 2013: Support for Charter

✦ Related opinions:

✦ Sept. 2013: opinion re religion as heritage

✦ Feb. 2014: opinion on ethnic communities.

What do we have?



The main relationships are between opinion on the Charter and Vote (voting intention for Parti Québécois vs Quebec Liberal Party)

What do we have?

- + A strong relationship between voting intention and support for the Charter. The direction of effect is not clear.
- + Voting intention explains 2/3 of the variance in support for the Charter (29% on 37%; 20% on 30%).
- + Support for the Charter explains almost all the variance in voting intention for the Parti Québécois but the overall explained variance is lower (22% on 25%; 16% on 20%).
- + Opinion on immigration related to opinion on the Charter.
- + Region, contacts, opinion related to secularism, to various communities, etc. do not explain much.

The role of public opinion research

- ✦ This debate almost started with a media decision to sponsor a poll. The polls feed the debate all along.
- ✦ But how can we be sure that these opinions “existed” before the questions were asked? A case of Mitofsky Law.
- ✦ What is, should be, the contribution of public opinion
 - ✦ When it comes to minority rights?
 - ✦ Or to questions like ethnic-based war?

The role of public opinion research

- ✦ How can researchers intervene
 - ✦ To question, criticize or validate the “official story” as it is told by the media, and get the appropriate information in order to do so?
 - ✦ To raise questions on the possible biases in the surveys in such a context?
 - ✦ To convey the teachings of research that shows that opinions on policies may vary with time and according to who proposes the policy.
- ✦ When every intervention is interpreted in order to classify people on one side or the other.