

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

CHRISTOPHER PAGE, *The Roles of Public Opinion Research in Canadian Government*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, 196 p., + appendices & index.

In *The Roles of Public Opinion Research in Canadian Government*, Christopher Page addresses a major gap in the literature on opinion research, the lack of information about how public opinion research is actually used by governments. Public opinion research has generally been understood as a useful tool in connecting governance to the interests of citizens, thus making governments more responsive to the views of citizens. Page discusses the results of interviews with ninety-five individuals, including pollsters, politicians, and public servants, systematically questioning the ability of governments to be responsive.

How public opinion research is used, by whom, and for what purposes are questions Page addresses in the first five chapters. Using three case studies, namely, the patriation of the Constitution, the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax, and the implementation of gun control legislation, he provides comparative examples of the use of public opinion research. The chapter on the limitations of public opinion research is not the most thorough one in the book, but it is nonetheless powerful in terms of its ability to explain why such research is typically used in a manner contrary to common understandings. Page defines polls and focus groups as passive forms of public opinion research, although he recognizes that focus groups sometimes include key figures associated with the issues under discussion. He demonstrates that it has often been assumed that passive opinion research has been incorporated into policy decision making by governments, and that this belief is probably pervasive because of the function and utility of early polling research.

In order to challenge these assumptions of incorporation and linkage, Page shows how passive opinion research is used in more recent policy processes by means of Ian McKinnon's road map metaphor, whereby opinion research makes it possible to know the level of difficulty involved in implementing policy. He also uses David Easton's model of a feedback loop which consists of government policy, citizen response to policy, and policy modification. To contest the linkage between government response and the opinions of citizens, three models outlined by Joel Brooks are also described: democratic linkage, democratic frustration, and counterfeit consensus (19). Democratic linkage describes polling as a tool which leaders employ for the purpose of making decisions that reflect the public's

concerns. The model of democratic frustration claims that policy and public opinion are generally antagonistic and thus public opinion research is often at odds with policies. Although counterfeit consensus is understood as a link between governance and the opinions of citizens, opinion research is seen as a manipulative tool exploited by governments to help implement predetermined policies.

To understand which models are the most fitting, Page investigates the commissioning of public opinion research and how such polls are communicated to the public. The development of policy is shown to be a six stage process, consisting of setting agendas; developing and studying policy alternatives; selecting, communicating, implementing, and evaluating policy (57). It is evident from the interviews he conducts that communicating policy is the stage where public opinion research is used the most. Agenda setting is second.

The strength of Page's analysis is its incredible thoroughness. For each of the case studies, he identifies what type of research was commissioned, by whom, and how it was used. His investigations confirm that the connection between governance and public opinion research is overstated at almost every step in policy formation. Similarly, Page devotes a chapter to discussing why it is that passive opinion research is typically prevented from having the impact that it is commonly thought to have. He discusses how timing, the nature of public opinion, and the nature of opinion research make it difficult to create or fully direct policy based on public opinion.

Though the analysis is quite comprehensive, and the book itself represents a major step in addressing an important but neglected area in public opinion research, particularly in regards to Canadian policy, Page does not put the same effort into discussing both how the media affect public opinion and the communication of policy. Though some examples are mentioned, the ability of the media to intervene in terms of policy communication and public opinion formation is generally evaded. Considering that media polls are often described as flawed in design but able to affect opinions and agendas, the influence of the media on public opinion research by the Canadian government would have been a relevant subject to explore. Furthermore, because one of the models used to analyze government responsiveness theorizes that public opinion research is a tool for governments to manipulate citizens' opinions, it would have been appropriate to discuss the link between the media, public opinion, and policy. Fully exploring the influence of the media on policy and public opinion would obviously have resulted in a study which was too ambitious, but a little more exploration of the topic might have made it easier to accept Page's conclusion that the term "manipulative" is too strong as a descriptor for much of the opinion research that is conducted.

Overall, *The Roles of Public Opinion Research in Canadian Government* is an insightful challenge to the general assumptions of how passive opinion research is used, and the ability of the government to respond to opinion

research. This book will be a welcome addition to the libraries of those who employ opinion research and who question the nature of government reactivity to the opinions of citizens.

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