

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PETER M. BUTLER, *Polling and Public Opinion: A Canadian Perspective*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, xvii + 172 p., index.

In *Polling and Public Opinion: A Canadian Perspective*, Peter M. Butler sets out to “take some of the mystery out of public opinion polling” (4) and does so in a clear, concise and cogent manner. In the first chapter, Butler assumes readers have little factual knowledge of the subject matter and thus engages in a necessary pedagogy in which he examines the social basis of opinion formation and change, and reviews the relevant theoretical perspectives on public opinion. Throughout the following chapters, “Public Opinion and the Mass Media” as well as “Public Opinion Polls and Social Policy,” Butler further elucidates the debate surrounding his subject. By chapter five, he assumes readers have sufficient knowledge that he feels confident to examine how “postmodern theory has implications for understanding changes in public opinion beyond a consideration of moral panic. It raises questions about our understandings of what public opinion is. Specifically, it challenges our frequent reliance on quantitative techniques to assess opinion and interpret the numerical data once it has been collected” (164).

Butler’s writing is straightforward. It would have been easy, given his expertise, to expand this book. But that could have defeated its utility. I certainly appreciated Butler’s thoughtful consideration of his intended readership by staying consistent in his writing style, which made for easy and enjoyable reading. Since he also builds logically from topic to topic I did not have to backtrack to understand the progression of the subject matter he had presented. However, while this was beneficial in the early chapters, as more contentious issues are introduced (such as polling and the media) it became a liability. As a fan of Michel Foucault, I was expecting a little more incitement in discussing polls as a form of “surveillance of the public” (165), particularly when Butler began his journey by informing us that “views held by individuals are always to some degree an expression of collective thinking ... that the formation of attitudes and opinions, as well as the values they usually reflect, are influenced by what we see and hear from others as we participate in group life” (8).

For example, Butler discusses the differences between attitude and opinion formation, noting that the latter “are a consequence of the attitudes which are held by individuals over time” (14). Generally, attitudes positively reflect behavior (e.g., drinkers usually have positive attitudes toward

alcohol use). Thus opinions on social policy initiatives may be measuring the strength of belongingness to a group (12) rather than individuals' support for behavioral changes. A recent Health Canada poll about anti-smoking graphics appearing on cigarette packages (conducted by Environics on 1,000 smokers and 606 potential quitters in 2007) found that there is almost universal recognition of the warning messages, but that an increasing number of smokers avoid looking at the images. Many smokers say the warnings, which have not changed in several years, are ineffective at getting them to stop smoking (Sarah Schmidt, "Anti-smoking Graphics Burning Out," Times Colonist, Victoria, BC, July 5, 2008, A6). Peter Butler warns us of this potential outcome when he notes that "the amount of opinion change in the direction of persuasive communication was found to correlate with the degree of perceived importance respondents placed on their membership in a group" (12). Policy-makers may therefore want to reconsider the importance of intended messages versus the perceived importance to smokers of their belonging to a group which has come under considerable pressure to conform to changing health habits.

I would recommend this book to consultants who are interested in trying to construct and conduct their own surveys. While not a comprehensive guide on how to do surveys, this book does provide some necessary direction on avoiding the pitfalls of assuming that getting an opinion is a simple process. I have had the unfortunate task on some consulting projects of having to make sense of surveys that would have benefited from the advice in Butler's book. In particular, the chapter on methods of collecting opinions reminds readers that "effective public opinion research comes down to asking the right questions" (67). Butler further warns that polling and opinions are complex topics open to debate when linked to policy-development, and that "the influence of opinion polls on the operations of government has been the subject of considerable discussion in the literature on politics" (110), something that should not be forgotten when constructing a survey to determine policy directives and initiatives for any institution.

Overall, I would recommend *Polling and Public Opinion* for courses in political science, political sociology, and research methods. It should also be considered in social psychology where attitudes and behaviors could be examined in relationship to opinions and policy-initiatives. For a semester-long course, Butler's book is an obvious solid choice as a textbook; however, a university course would benefit from additional readings expanding upon the topics, discussions, and debates he raises if students are to fully appreciate the subject matter.

Butler took on the task of writing a solid introduction to polling and public opinion from a Canadian perspective and accomplished his objective of taking some of the mystery out of the subject. The author of introductory texts is always challenged by the necessity of educating readers without becoming pedantic, or losing them in polemical debates which they are not ready to tackle. Butler handles this balance admirably without being patronizing. The transition from being a passive consumer of knowledge to

knowing enough to contribute to debates is subtle but definitely achieved by this book.

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