Exploring the Use of Public Opinion as a Source in Writing Contemporary Indonesian History

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Abstract: *Contemporary historical writing methods and methodologies are constantly evolving. There used to be a "no documents, no history" dictum. History is hidden in civilization because there is no written source. Historical sources are increasingly widespread in their development, written and oral, and material sources. Understanding of historical facts is increasingly varied. Methodologically, historical science has converged with the social sciences. History is an open science that can be written from a multidimensional perspective. Events that are considered ordinary turn out to have meaningful social significance. Today digital technology is developing rapidly. The exchange of data information is getting faster. The high level of public participation in the digital world, especially in social media, is one of the extraordinary phenomena that can be witnessed in this era of disruption. This paper aimed to analyze public opinion as a historical source, especially in contemporary historical writing. Public opinion can be valuable as a historical writing resource, although it must be treated critically.*

Keywords: *Public Opinion, Historical Sources, Contemporary History*

Introduction

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) said that "all history is contemporary history." He is a twentieth-century Italian philosopher who represents the idealists in the historical approach that puts the current viewpoint on historical writing. He criticizes Leopold von Ranke's suggestion to reach ultimate objectivity as it occurs (1795–1861). In this position, understand caring for present interests that historians cannot avoid. It tells the truth as it is (the collection of facts) regarding previous occurrences, but it is solely chronic. Chronic, according to him, is only something, "namely corpses or carcasses" from history, whereas true history is an act of the spirit. As a result, he argued, "all true history is contemporary history," and as a result, each generation will write for themselves based on their interests in the present (Sulistiyono, 2009; Gardiner, 1959).

Croce's statement is often addressed with a view that tends to be pragmatic, that the true history is the history written today or the history of the current rulers. However, let us look at it from a more substantive side. Contemporary understanding is defined as history close to our present, characterized by the period after the outbreak of the Second World War until today. In the case of contemporary Indonesian history, the temporal limit is after 1945 (Kuntowijoyo, 1994). The explanation also determines this closeness that the memory of the event is part of a public autobiography (Conati, 2015).

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Contemporary history is problematic regarding the complexity of events and their interpretation. Reconstruction cannot be done thoroughly because not all documents, archives, and other primary sources can be opened and studied. In addition, the fact that the historical actors are still alive makes it challenging to write history (Suwirta, 2019). Several controversial events that can be observed in the contemporary history of Indonesia include *Serangan Umum 1 Maret* (the March 1 General Offensive), *Peristiwa G 30 S* (the G 30 S Incident), and the Integration of East Timor into Indonesia in 1976. These events still invite interpretations regarding the discovery of new facts.

What is interesting about the development of contemporary Indonesian historiography is the role of public opinion as a historical source. If "past-history" is only about elites and rulers, then "contemporary history" involves many ordinary people, the general public. The need to pay attention to public opinion as a historical source is also driven by the trend of technological developments that allow the public to express their opinions on national issues that are currently happening. Public opinion concerns not just political and economic issues but also culture, fashion, art, consumption, markets, and public relations.

One of the exciting surveys recently, for example, relates to the discourse on extending President Jokowi's period of office to three periods and the postponement of the 2024 election. A survey was conducted by the Populi Center public opinion and policy research institute. Based on the survey, 64.4 percent of the public said they did not agree with the extension of President Jokowi's period of office (55.1 percent disagreed, 9.3 percent strongly disagreed). On the other hand, only 27.6 percent of the people agree with the discourse (24.3 percent agree, strongly agree 3.3 percent). As for 8 percent of respondents, it was refused to answer this question. This survey aims to look at the political dynamics ahead of the 2024 elections that are getting closer, as well as national issues that have recently been increasingly discussed (Alfarizi, 2022). For political scientists and historians, public opinion is emphasized in its context, which influences government and government regulations, and emphasizes the importance of public opinion in development (Tosepu, 2018).

Literature Review

Public opinion is described as a process that combines private citizens' thoughts, feelings, and suggestions with the policy choices made by government officials responsible for achieving social order in situations that contain conflicting debates and disagreements about what will be done and how to do so. Cultip and Center in Sastropoetro (1987) express attitudes about a controversial issue (Tosepu, 2018). In Public Opinion, Bernard Hennessy (1975) defined public opinion as a complex of beliefs expressed by significant persons on an issue of public importance. Moy and Bosch (2013) explain that public opinion is a process community learns about an issue that then affects attitudes, views, and behavior (Annas et al., 2019). A slightly different approach is displayed by Juariyah (2019), who states that a public opinion is a group that is not organized and spreads in various places united by a certain issue by making contact with each other and usually through the mass media.

The most common technique uses a questionnaire to obtain information from groups of people, called sampling. However, another technique that can be used is polls or polls. One of the main ones is the Gallup Poll, developed by George Gallup, a statistician, in 1935.

Previously, the Gallup Poll was conducted by surveying people's homes but then developed by calling randomly (Tosepu, 2018).

In Indonesia, polls currently have a limited effect compared to other forms of public opinion expression, such as demonstrations and strikes. Demonstrations and strikes will be reported more by the media than poll results. Therefore, the poll results complement the news in the mass media (Adiputra, 2008).

Beside that, there is public opinion voiced through the newspaper, radio, or television, public meetings, and letters to politicians (Boyce, 1979). Public opinion does not only take the form of verbal and written, but also in the form of behavior, such as demonstrations, strikes, or petitions.

To the extent of the author's knowledge, the study of public opinion as a source of contemporary historical writing in Indonesia has not yet been conducted. Therefore, this preliminary study does not take several references from Indonesian authors. However, the use of public opinion in the Western intellectual tradition has been going on since the 18th century. Juergen Habermas calls this transformation "public sphere or *offentlichkeit*" (Burke, 2015). Habermas talks about traditional public spaces controlled by a small group of bourgeois elites, or "private people who collectively become public" through their institutions, such as coffee shops, theatre buildings, and newspapers.

Curti (1937) points out the critical role of propaganda in identity formation in American history. Western historians refer to the end of the 18th century as a time of public opinion development. Finally, the concept of public space made its way into the historical narrative. According to Gellner, the public or civil society is a collection of civilized non-governmental entities strong enough to counterbalance the state (Burke, 2015).

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive and literature study method (Moleong, 2016). The literature study is carried out by exploring various sources related to the study of public opinion and history and looking for their relevance in the context of contemporary Indonesian history. The library sources used include journals, proceedings, books, and others. Meanwhile, digital sources are used to explore the trend of dominant public opinion in recent times. Then an analysis of the possibility of using public opinion as a historical source is carried out.

The subject matter of history is unique. History does not think inductively or deductively but adhusively. That is, history only pays attention to facts. The business of a historian is not to generalize but to tell the story (Muhsin, 2009). Facts are data that researchers have verified. Facts are historians' interpretations of the sources they have obtained. Historians have varied opinions about the facts. First, facts are real things that historians can reach. Second, facts are the result of constructions that exist only in the minds of historians. Public opinion finds a place in a new genre of social history research that allows a wider use of sources.

Findings & Discussion

1. The Problems of Public Opinion as a Historical Source

Methodically, there are some substantial problems when public opinion is used as a user, either in the context of users of survey or poll results or doing their own quantitative data

collection techniques. This issue must be considered when turning public opinion into a historical source.

First, the simplistic of public opinion to obtain generalizations. Nevertheless, history is ideographic, not nomothetic—ideographic means describing an event in detail to reveal the meaning of the event. Meanwhile, the nomothetic is universal and applies in every context. For example, as stated by Kuntowijoyo (1995), the Indonesian revolution was not the work of extremists like Dutch propaganda was answered by showing that it was a youth revolution. Ben Anderson (1988) calls it the youth revolution. Likewise, the generation of Marxists who declared all revolutions as class struggles was not proven in the Indonesian revolution, which was driven by the idea of nationalism.

Second, public opinion is unstable. Public opinion often changes at a certain time. Under these conditions, it is not easy to use data and information, especially on social media that interact quickly and dynamically. For example, we open certain information pages so anyone can reduce or add information. As a diachronic science, history cannot be separated from the wider temporal space because no history stands alone. This distance must be overcome in the synchronic and diachronic temporal dimensions.

Third, history seeks uniqueness that cannot be reduced to numbers. Polls have reduced public understanding. The public is different from the public in the sense of polling. Public opinion, in general, is everyone, while in the sense of polling, they are scientifically selected as respondents in research (Tosepu, 2018). As stated by Gottschalk (2008), there is an ethical problem in polling. The good judgment of the majority of the individuals questioned on a character does not prove that he is indeed good. It's just a poll; that is what the public is asking.

Fourth, setting the agenda. One of the important roles of public opinion is to strengthen the state to issue policies and ensure support from the public. Public opinion also supports figures or politicians who wish to compete in a contest. Media framing and priming greatly affect public perception and how they assess government. Priming is the process by which the media focuses on some issues, not others, changing people's standards for evaluating political candidates and figures. Framing is the process of presenting media by emphasizing certain parts, highlighting certain aspects, and bringing up certain news stories from reality or events (Rianto, 2010). Agenda setting is not only done by the state but can be promoted by the community and interest groups. Public opinion like this is subjective and biased.

Fifth, the quality of informants (resource persons) in public opinion and history is different. Historically, the testimony of contemporaries, either as perpetrators or people who witnessed events, has an important and credible value. This is called the primary source. The opposite of primary sources is secondary sources, namely those who are not present and witness an event firsthand.

2. Considering Public Opinion in Historical Studies

The development of history as an open science takes place so dynamically. In recent decades there has been an awareness that the study of history is not only concerned with history as a science but how to develop history as a public consciousness. Thus, public history emerged as a bridge connecting history with the public. Public history seeks to involve the community or the public to reconstruct past events and communicate them back to the public, or the history

of, by, and to the public (Amboro, 2020). In this regard, public opinion as part of public participation can play an important role in the development of public history.

One of the most important changes in the use of public opinion is the democratization of history. If, in conventional history, elite ideas and behavior become the source of historical writing, ordinary people play an important role. The idea of writing from below has long been necessary because of the need for a wider social role. Writing that is too elitist is seen as insufficient to discuss a wider dimension.

The public can now participate in important issues due to widespread technological advances. If it used to be a real public space where everyone had to come together to talk, now the exchange of ideas and opinions takes place in a very open, spontaneous and virtual space. Moreover, technology has advanced to the point where people can express their opinions in public spaces quickly and easily.

Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and blogs are social media that spread information to build public opinion. Social media has a character that conventional media does not have. Besides being able to be distributed to many parties, social media messages are not controlled. Recipients decide for themselves when to open information and interact. Social media has no restrictions, no control, can be faster, easier to access, and can interact directly with audiences (Qadri, 2020). Alkatiri et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative analysis of the issue of the new normal implementation on Twitter social media. The result shows a lack of public support (50.17 percent) for the government's policy.

There are three types of public opinion, according to James N. Rosenau in Tosepu (2018) as follows: First, the mass public is those who are a bit far from events (events), so they become public as well. Second, the attentive public is those whose position is near the scene, so they have great attention. Third, the opinion-making public is those who directly become opinion makers or actors of the event. Some of these categories will determine credibility as a source person.

In the study of history, known artefacts, socifacts, and mentifacts (Kartodirdjo, 1992). The fact must be specific, whether individual or concrete or general and abstract. Furthermore, historical facts must have social significance, whether they have a certain influence on society by reflecting the character of society as a whole. Public opinion can become the "*zeitgeist* (spirit of the times)" that reflects the understanding of public beliefs regarding developing issues and the government's policy choices. This can be categorized as a manifestation of social facts that develop in society.

How can public opinion be used as a historical source? *First*, the researcher must take a distance from the object he is studying, both in terms of subject matter and temporal. Temporal proximity will complicate objectivity and connection with historical actors. *Second*, public opinion data is not the only source of historical writing. There must be a comparison with other sources. With corroboration, the facts presented become stronger. *Third*, public opinion can be used as a background for research. The data obtained through surveys or opinion polls can be used as the actual background for the selection of the chosen theme. Simplification is needed by historians when conducting analysis. However, simplification is done after critically reading the data, especially when criticizing sources. *Fourth*, the issue becomes important in a study. Without problems, the research would be meaningless. "without question there is no history"

(Abdullah & Surjomihardjo, 1985). In public opinion, there are issues about the existing conditions and government policies on a matter.

Historians have to sort out which opinions are real or fabricated. History must compare opinions through comparative criticism with written sources and others. In contrast to oral history which focuses on informants. Public opinion is sometimes also created for a specific purpose through the formation of issues. Quantitative errors can occur when researchers trust statistics without searching for other sources. Historians must think critically and be able to distance themselves from the public.

In addition to political history which is the backbone of history (politics is the backbone of history), "social history" or "new social history" can be a theme for writing history that uses sources of public opinion. Social history provides a broader space for many layers of society to appear on the historical stage. So that, history writing avoids elitist bias or the "grand theory of the big men." The material used in social history is very diverse. However, an important aspect of the uniqueness of social history writing must be considered is limiting itself to a particular space and time (Saimima, 2014).

In social science research, the study of mass public opinion becomes essential and attracts the attention of political scientists because of the relationship between public opinion and government policy. Political scientists and others must be open to various approaches to studying public preferences and government policies. Likewise, historians must begin to intensely develop a "new social history" (Jacobs, 1989).

The term "new social history" refers to a relatively new historical study that focuses on the role of public opinions in the growth of social and economic systems through the use of primary sources. This research contrasts with traditional history, which exposes many elite perspectives and ideas. Nonetheless, recent history has produced information that allows us to study and develop hypotheses about the relationship between public opinion and policy (Jacobs, 1989).

This paper is a preliminary study of efforts to relevant historical studies in modern discourse. Although admittedly, some things must be seriously discussed again. However, alternative efforts to seek methodological thinking need to be made so that rapprochement efforts between various disciplines need to be continued.

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