Lord Bryce's analysis of the rôle of public opinion in a democracy was particularly noteworthy. He knew that in no country is public opinion so powerful as in the United States, and he saw clearly wherein rule by public opinion falls short in this country. The greatest weakness of government by public opinion, Bryce said, is the difficulty of ascertaining it.

Bryce saw clearly how inadequate are the means of knowing the will of the majority of the people in this country. Such is the din of voices here, Bryce wrote in his book The American Commonwealth, that it is hard to say which cry prevails—which comes from the throats of the many, which from the throats of the few. "The organs of opinion," he said, "seem almost as numerous as the people themselves, and they are all engaged in representing their own view as that of the 'people.'"

Even an election, Bryce pointed out, could at best do no more than test the division of opinion between two or three great parties, leaving unanswered the will of the people in respect to the issues. And if the election happened to depend on the personal merits of the candidates, then interpretation was even more difficult.

Bryce believed it to be one of the chief problems of all free nations to "devise means whereby the national will should be quickly known." So important did he regard this problem that he said the next and final stage in our American form of government would be reached "if the will of the majority of citizens were to become ascertainable at all times, without the need of its passing through a body of representatives—possibly without the need of voting machinery at all."

A while ago President Roosevelt said that the majority of Americans are in favor of his Court proposal. Was he right or was he wrong?

How shall we interpret the great vote registered in the 1936 election for Mr. Roosevelt? Was it a mandate to liberalize the Court? Was it a mandate to continue the program of spending? Was it a mandate to revive the NRA? To distribute wealth? Or was it merely a tribute to a great personality?

Was the great majority received by Hoover in 1928 a mandate to retain Prohibition? Was it a mandate to continue the policies of the economic royalists of that golden era of Republicanism? Or was it merely a vote to keep out of the White House a man whose religion and whose background were not approved by many voters?

A placard which appeared in one of the scenes of Of Thee I Sing car-
ried words more nearly true than the authors of this musical comedy probably suspected. The sign read, "A Vote for Wintergreen Is a Vote for Wintergreen."

James Bryce said that the next and final stage in our democracy would be reached if the will of the majority of citizens were to become ascertainable at all times.

With the development of the science of measuring public opinion, it can be stated with but few qualifications, that this stage in our democracy is rapidly being reached. It is now possible to ascertain, with a high degree of accuracy, the views of the people on all national issues. As evidence, let me cite the work of the American Institute of Public Opinion.

The Institute is a fact-finding organization which functions in the realm of opinion in much the same way as the Associated Press, the United Press, and the International News Service function in the realm of events. Like these press services, the work of the Institute is entirely underwritten by a group of leading newspapers—newspapers which represent every shade of political belief.

During the last two years the Institute of Public Opinion has conducted a continuous day-by-day, week-by-week census of the public mind. The view of hundreds of thousands of voters of the country on more than 300 different issues have been canvassed in this period. Findings on issues of current importance have been reported. Facts have been gathered, for the purpose of establishing trends, on still other issues which may be of national interest in the future. Bryce believed that the will of the public should not only be known, but that it should be quickly known. With its present organization, the Institute of Public Opinion is equipped to make a complete national poll in a period of ten days; and if the need were urgent, this time could be reduced to three days.

How accurate have been the Institute's findings as measured by election returns: how often have the Institute's polls on issues foretold coming events? A brief account of the major issues covered during these two years will help answer this question.

One of the first national issues on which the Institute reported had to do with old-age pensions and the Townsend movement. Our findings showed that whereas the country was overwhelmingly in favor of old-age pensions, a politically insignificant number were in favor of the Townsend program. Our report on this issue made in January 1936 met with a large measure of skepticism, but subsequent events, particularly the fall election returns, proved the accuracy of this forecast.

Early in January 1936, the Institute showed that the AAA was opposed by 59 voters in every 100. Even the rural areas of the Middle West were almost evenly divided on
the merits of this New Deal act despite what seemed to be contrary evidence supplied by the corn-hog referendum among farmers. Since the country did not have an opportunity to vote on this issue, it is impossible to know the accuracy of the Institute's results. Analysis of the November election returns provides, however, one interesting bit of evidence indicating the lack of enthusiasm for this measure: the Roosevelt vote was smaller in 1936 as compared with 1932 in approximately three-fourths of all rural counties of the country. Whereas the Republicans carried only 121 counties in the Middle West in 1932, they carried nearly twice that number (235) in 1936.

The likelihood of a split within the ranks of the Democratic party along conservative-liberal lines was clearly indicated in the vote on many issues (including relief, spending, government regulation of agriculture and industry, and other New Deal policies) reported by the Institute. It was more directly foretold by a poll reported a year ago in which voters had a chance to classify themselves as Conservatives or Liberals. The significant fact revealed by the poll was that nearly 40 per cent of all voters who cast their ballots for Roosevelt regarded themselves as Conservatives or Liberals. The South, whose Senators and Representatives deserted the New Deal on many issues in the last session of Congress, split fifty-fifty between Conservatives and Liberals. In the fall election the Roosevelt vote in the South increased in 479 counties, but declined in nearly twice as many—811.

During the closing days of the Presidential campaign the Republicans made a strong bid for votes on the "pay-roll tax," the administration's social security measure. Little did they recognize that more than two out of every three voters in the country favored this far-reaching New Deal act. In the very cities where the Republicans were trying hardest to use this issue to win votes, the social security act was overwhelmingly approved, in some instances by as many as 85 voters in every 100. Is there any wonder that Roosevelt gained votes daily during this attack on a measure which even the rank and file of the Republicans approved?

At a time when Father Coughlin and Dr. Townsend were talking in terms of a third party backed by 25,000,000 voters, the Institute of Public Opinion estimated, on the bases of its polls, a following of 1,800,000. Two days before the election the Institute predicted that Lemke would poll only 2.2 per cent of the total vote. He actually received 1.9 per cent.

The Institute forecast the election of President Roosevelt, giving him a substantial electoral vote majority. The final poll gave Roosevelt forty states with 485 electoral votes; it failed to give him six additional
states, which he carried, with 46 electoral votes.

In addition to these forecasts the Institute has made forecasts in nine other state elections, all of which have been correct.

This evidence of accuracy is not presented here in a spirit of boastfulness, but merely to indicate how far the science of measuring public opinion has developed. I have said on many occasions that I do not believe that any great social good comes from being able to predict an election forty-eight hours in advance. But I do see the value of elections in determining the accuracy of methods used in measuring public opinion; for if the methods are not accurate in forecasting an election, they will probably prove equally inaccurate in measuring public opinion on national issues.

The two great issues of this year have been labor disorders and the President's proposal to enlarge the Supreme Court. What have the Institute's polls showed on these two national questions?

The drive to organize labor in many industries, and the use of the new weapon—the sit-down strike—provide an interesting example of how public opinion changes. At the beginning of the year a great majority of people throughout the country were sympathetic to labor unions. Six months later labor had gained many victories, but at the expense of much public sympathy, particularly in the middle classes.

Continuously during this period the Institute of Public Opinion covered the public's attitude on various phases of the labor question—the split between the C.I.O. and A.F. of L., the General Motors strike, the public's attitude toward laws regulating and curbing unions.

More than anything else the use of the sit-down strike alienated the sympathies of the middle classes. When the General Motors strike began, for example, only a slight majority of persons (53 per cent) sympathized with the employers. As the strike progressed and as the public had time to form an opinion of sit-down strikes, the percentage who took the side of the employers increased steadily. At the end of the strike 62 per cent of all people took the side of the company whereas 38 per cent took the side of the strikers.

Two-thirds of the voters of the country believed that sit-down strikes should be made illegal, and the same proportion believe that authorities should use force in removing sit-down strikers. At the close of the period of intensive organization of labor and of strikes, the Institute found the public overwhelmingly of the opinion that labor unions should be regulated by the government, should be required to incorporate.

Significantly, one of the groups found most hostile to labor was the group composed of farmers—with whom labor hopes eventually to form a political party.
The Supreme Court issue is a perfect illustration of the confusion which follows an attempt to read too much into election returns. It is at the same time a perfect example of why it is essential, in a democracy such as ours, to be able to know the will of the people on any given issue, at any given time.

A while ago James Farley said: “The people of this country are for the Roosevelt program whatever it is. They are for the Court program because the President proposed it.” The President himself more recently has said that the majority of the people favor his Court proposal. What are the views of the people?

As early as November 1935, the Institute learned in one of its national polls that 63 in every 100 voters with views on this issue were opposed to curbing the power of the Supreme Court. The same poll was repeated in December 1936. A majority was again registered against curbing or limiting the power of the Court to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional. In our report of December 13, we said: “In the next session of Congress there is almost certain to be agitation for a constitutional amendment to curtail the power of the Supreme Court. Already it is reported that a number of Senators are organizing a bloc to fight for an amendment. If such a measure is passed... its chances of being ratified by the voters of the nation would be slim. A majority of voters are opposed to any limiting of the Supreme Court’s power, to any tampering with its right to say ‘thou shalt not’ to Congress and to the President.”

Up to this point the President had not taken a definite stand on the Court issue. On February 5 the President threw the full weight of his great popularity behind a proposal to liberalize the Court by enlarging its membership to fifteen. With his personal sponsorship of a plan to liberalize the Court, what position would voters of the nation take—particularly those who voted for him in the fall election?

The President made his proposal on Friday morning. Within a few hours the Institute’s machinery was set in motion to take a national poll on this issue. Results of the first poll showed 53 voters in every 100 opposed to the President’s plan. In subsequent polls this figure changed to 52, and in April, just before the Wagner Act decision, to 51. When this decision, favorable to labor and to the New Deal, was handed down, the trend changed and the percentage of persons opposed to the President’s plan increased to 53. With Justice Van Devanter’s resignation the percentage of voters opposed had increased to 58 in every 100, or to a point almost the same as it was in December before the President had sponsored his own plan for liberalizing the Court.

The President apparently still believes that the majority of voters are favorable to his program. In fact
he has intimated that he will renew his fight to enlarge the Court. Do the voters of the country want him to renew this fight? The Institute is presently engaged in polling the country on this question. The first returns look as if the country by a thumping majority is ready to "call the whole thing off." The Institute has discovered an interesting fact in the course of its Supreme Court polls; it has discovered that over a third of the people who voted for the President last fall are against his plan. And yet virtually all of these same persons are enthusiastically for Roosevelt today.

Standard political procedure calls for making the Supreme Court one of the issues in the forthcoming Congressional campaign. In fact, former President Hoover has made this suggestion, and the President himself, judging from his last talk, appears ready to carry the issue into the campaign.

What will happen? If President Roosevelt retains his present great popularity, the Democrats will emerge again from the elections with a substantial majority, if somewhat smaller than 1936.

If the Court proposal has been made an issue in the campaign, the Democrats, and in fact most people, will regard it as a mandate to enlarge the Court, despite the fact that people may hold the same views at that time as they do today. The President will surely regard it as a mandate to enlarge the Court.

Here certainly is revealed one of the greatest weaknesses of our democracy. Here is evidence of the basic truth of Lord Bryce's assertion that the next state in the development of the American form of government would be reached if the will of the people were to become ascertainable at all times.

The measurement of public opinion need not be confined to questions of government and politics. It is equally useful in the field of social problems. I believe that when full use is made of procedures which have been developed it will be possible to speed up the whole program of social welfare. Let me cite one example.

For many years the word "syphilis" was banned from many publications, because the editors thought that decent people did not want to talk about it. Months ago we learned, in the course of taking polls on this issue, that the public not only was ready to discuss freely the problem of venereal diseases but that the public in its thinking had traveled far beyond legislators in the matter of public control of these diseases.

Let me cite another example in a different field. We know that certain prejudices exist among Protestants and Catholics and Jews. How can we deal effectively with these prejudices unless we know a great deal more about them? Why do they exist? Where do they exist? What is the trend—are relations among these groups improving or
are they growing worse? The same machinery which has been developed to learn the views of the public on political and social issues can be used with equal success in this field, in my opinion.

In the course of polling the country on more than three hundred issues, it has been possible to arrive at conclusions based on facts regarding the intelligence of the mass of voters. The Institute's representatives are daily talking to all classes of society in every state of the union—to persons on relief, share-croppers, bricklayers, farmers, merchants, housewives, teachers. What evidence is there that these people are capable of self-government?

Sir Robert Peel described public opinion as "a great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs." We could quarrel a month over such a definition. The important point, as I see it, is not what constitutes public opinion, but whether public opinion, and by this I mean majority opinion, adds up to something that is sound.

Democracy depends on the collective intelligence of the people; it does not require that every voter be intelligent. With a corps of interviewers daily asking questions of all kinds, the Institute is in a good position to know how ill-informed, how prejudiced, how stupid are some voters. We have found persons who do not know the difference between the Supreme Court and the local police court. And we have found still others who believe that sterilizing the unfit means washing them with the right kind of soap!

But this is unimportant, for a democracy depends for good government on the collective judgment of the majority. I would not argue that the views of the common people always provide the best answer to any national question. But on the basis of the evidence which the Institute has amassed during the last two years I have come to believe absolutely in the statement which Theodore Roosevelt once made: "The majority of plain people of the United States will, day in and day out, make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any smaller class or group of men will make in trying to govern them."

The science of measuring public opinion is only in its infancy. Many things have still to be learned; procedures must be developed. We are still in the experimental stage. But of one thing we can be absolutely certain, and that is, with many of our leading psychologists and social scientists interested in the problem of measurement, with growing experience of such organizations as our own, it will not be long before we can say with utmost confidence that the final stage in the development of our democracy, as described by Bryce, has been reached—that the will of the majority of citizens can be ascertained at all times.