

Why Policymakers Should Ignore Public Opinion Polls

by Robert Weissberg

Executive Summary

Policymakers often assume that public opinion is a reliable guide to making public policy, but they should not. Public opinion polling measures the wishes and preferences of respondents, neither of which reflect the costs or risks associated with a policy. Public opinion expressed in polls cannot inform policy choice, which requires attention to tradeoffs among values, to second-best possibilities, and to unexpected risks.

Polls are unlikely to be improved enough to help with policy choices. Improvements would make the product (poll results) too expensive or too difficult to obtain from weary respondents.

We should not expect to see the day when polling can replace reasoned policy choices by elected representatives of the people.

Despite all the fancy numerology surrounding modern polling, the extracted advice should not guide public policy. Although public desires for "more government intervention to help (fill in worthy cause)" are real in that people sincerely crave the promised improvement, those cries for government action fail to meet even the most minimal standards of legitimate counsel. This paper shows how little polls tell us about public policy and why we should ignore the proffered guidance to policymakers.

If public opinion drives democracy, then what the people think becomes the central question of politics. Polls are powerful because they provide answers to that question.

Introduction: Why Polls Matter

Polls are a daily part of our political life, yet their power is a mystery. Polls plainly lack any legal authority. A wise officeholder may prudently consult his or her pollster, but, so far, surveys cannot defeat incumbents or veto legislation. Technically, they can be readily ignored. So, why do polls matter so much, especially to public policy?

Keep in mind that the United States did not begin as a direct democracy under majority rule. The Framers of our Constitution hoped to create a constitutional republic, which required constraints on the power of the majority. Such restraints both prevented the tyranny of the majority and promoted the stability of the new regime. The Framers did not doubt that the legitimacy of the American republic lay in the consent of the governed, but they did not ask the people to decide every last detail. They did not expect that the people could or should govern directly.¹

We have come a long way from the Founders' balanced, representative democracy. Public opinion has achieved a remarkable, though largely unnoticed, ascendancy. The burden of proof is now on those who oppose public opinion. Chalk up a mighty victory for early 20th-century Progressives (and numerous contemporary academics), who argued that the cure for democracy's ills is more democracy. Indeed, recent polls suggest that the public has become enamored of its own wisdom: in one 1999 survey, some 80 percent of respondents believed that the nation would be better off if leaders followed public views.²

If public opinion drives democracy, then what the people think becomes the central question of politics. Polls are powerful because they provide answers to that question. And their answers are not just opinion but "science." Polling methodology has become complex and highly quantitative, an important mark of expertise in an innumerate world. Imagine rejoinders to those who

doubt the wisdom of polls. The new priestly class of pollsters, like pedants mouthing Latin to befuddle the ignorant, might explain that the data were drawn from a multistage, stratified random sample weighted to capture major SMSA's with an oversample of higher SES respondents, or something equally technically abstruse. Who has the self-confidence to question such erudition?

That aura of science translates directly into policymaking. As the old saying goes, "In Washington, good numbers beat bad numbers and bad numbers beat no numbers at all." As former presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan artfully explained: "In every political meeting I have ever been to, if there was a pollster there his work carried the most weight because he was the only one with hard data, with actual numbers on paper. Everyone else had an opinion, the pollster has a fact."³ The contest between statistics and hunch is hardly an even battle: the former almost always win.

Polls also set boundaries on legitimate policy debates. Each survey result incrementally shapes the contemporary Zeitgeist, the "everybody knows" delineation of "normal" versus "extreme." Recall British social scientist Walter Bagehot's observation from nearly 150 years ago: "Public opinion is a permeating influence, and it exacts obedience to itself, it requires us to think other men's thoughts, and to speak other men's words, and to follow other men's habits."⁴ As history shows, today's "obvious" remedies may have once been Utopian extremism, and vice versa. Who would have believed a half century ago that charter schools or privatized Social Security might be "reasonable" while state-mandated racial segregation would be unthinkable? A steady barrage of polls, all pointing in a new direction, helped facilitate that shift. Armed with convenient hard data, people who endorse once-lonely causes gain authority and respectability.

Against this background, we should not be surprised that Americans look to polls to make tough policy choices, a kind of direct democracy through scientific technique. If

the vox populi is the voice of wisdom, if not of God, those who hear its words most clearly should dominate policymaking. Should we take notice of the polls' reports of public demands for more benevolence from Washington? Or, in line with traditional skepticism toward heeding popular outcries, might those demands be dismissible foolishness? On the whole, judging by the growing number of commissioned polls and the rising stature of the pollster, one must conclude that reverence for unrestrained majority rule is growing. Moreover the high priests of public opinion insist that their polls convey legitimate advice about policies and political strategies. They are wrong.

Polls and Public Policy

What exactly is a poll supposed to measure? Surprisingly, that question is seldom addressed in the many books on the craft of survey research. An inquiry might assess hopes and aspirations, what Americans want from government or the economy. Or a poll might calibrate political job performance. A survey might also predict future behavior—voting intentions or whether parents would send their children to a charter school. Polls might also conveniently reveal hidden behavior, for example, campaign donations or rioting. A survey can also measure even vague emotions by asking respondents to express likes and dislikes for controversial groups or famous personalities. All of those inquiries are easily (and properly) executed via the poll, and none requires especially demanding civic performances by respondents.

Queries about policies are another matter. Provided certain modest technical details are satisfied, the door to fantasyland is ajar. The public's unbounded cravings can safely be brought to the fore. Provided some client can be found, researchers can literally ask about desiring eternal life; meanwhile the respondent is perfectly free to say, "Yes, put me down as 'Strongly Agree' regarding cheating death." In other words, accurately assessing

popular sentiments down to four decimal places proves nothing about the political germaneness of those utterances, despite adroit statistical manipulation.

To introduce a modicum of order to "public opinion," consider the following distinctions. When a poll solicits opinions on the evidently unobtainable—"free" health care, a world without pollution, all students exceeding the average—the results may be called *wishes*. Nothing commands that those wishes be legal or financially feasible, let alone fulfillable under existing circumstances. Nevertheless, expressed urges may be exceptionally important politically, regardless of their imaginary flavor, and a crafty official may use them for political advantage. Unrealistic wants can shape spellbinding rhetoric or lofty programs designed to seduce the unwary. Speechwriters undoubtedly love polls eliciting such aspirations. Nothing (at least technically) forbids asking citizens whether they favor every American boy and girl receiving a world-class education as a prelude to campaign promises. We should not, however, conflate shameless pandering with an informed public choice of a deliverable policy.

More commonplace in the poll cosmology are what may be called preferences, wants or desires with some reasonable connection to reality. At a minimum, they are legal, fiscally doable, and enjoy some leadership support. More mundane prerequisites separating wishes from preferences, for example, would include sufficient technical acumen, properly trained personnel, clear performance standards, and everything else necessary for successful implementation. A poll showing a widespread desire to link federal educational assistance to student test scores reveals a preference. The defining element is that, unlike a wish for universal superior performance, preferences could be achieved. In principle, contemporary polls are fully capable of soliciting precise public preferences. Whether preferences are an adequate guide for policy is another story.

Consider for a moment the distance

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between the world of wishes and preferences and the world of a policymaker who must exercise *policy choice*. A policymaker always must deal with grim reality. Choices are rarely ideal, and second-best outcomes are generally accepted as inevitable. Moreover, every choice must, to the extent feasible, be balanced against every other choice past, present, and future; policy choice inevitably involves tradeoffs. For example, allocating \$100 billion to hire additional teachers may mean defunding other worthy programs, borrowing, or raising taxes. Moreover, people making policy choices must attend to consequences, since they are inevitably held accountable by attentive citizens, lobbyists, fellow decisionmakers, and untold others. Policy choices also typically reflect a degree of expertise and are subject to multiple reviews. It is perhaps physically impossible to legislate in complete ignorance, and, if it were attempted (as sometimes does occur), the howls of outrage would be deafening. To be sure, individual legislators might be occasionally perplexed, but various institutional mechanisms (e.g., staff, advising bodies) routinely ensure minimal technical know-how.

In sum, soliciting the wishes and preferences of the public can be done but is barely relevant to the world of the policymaker. A huge *political* gap thus separates facile aspirations from legitimate policy advice. For leaders to conflate wishes with policy choices would be the equivalent of allowing personalized money printing. If polls are to advise leaders, they must elicit public views about policy choice. Can they do that?

The Limits of Polls

Contemporary polls tell us almost nothing worthwhile about the policy choices facing the nation. Even if we were to believe that America is a nation of philosopher kings, and that every poll is perfectly executed, this heretical judgment still stands. How many polls eliciting public generosity for innumerable worthy causes actually present respon-

dents with a final bill? Every spending choice is independent of any other, a situation at odds with any known political reality. The term “tradeoff” has apparently been banished from the pollsters’ vocabulary.

No Second-Best Choices

Policy choices and survey responses inhabit different worlds. Politics, as the old saying goes, is the art of the possible. Seldom are first—or even second—choices readily obtainable. Settling for a few cents on the dollar is often the best possible deal. Minimizing losses rather than maximizing gains might even be the superior outcome. Unfortunately, even polls that meet the highest technical standards forbid respondents to “play politics” and settle for less than optimal choices. Without such haggling, it is pointless to speak of the public’s conveying a legitimate message. At best, polls might uncover collections of first choices, all of which are totally independent of each other.

Consider, for example, a philanthropic soul who wishes to spend \$10 billion of government money to combat AIDS. This is the stark message to the policymaker: one person wants a \$10 billion increase. If, however, that “person” were a legislature with multiple preferences, not an isolated individual, this statement would merely be an opening offer, subject to the negotiation necessary to reach a majority decision. If perchance \$10 billion was an excessive amount (or a mean-spirited pittance) according to the philanthropic soul’s frugal (or philanthropic) colleagues, compromise would be essential. Conceivably, this \$10 billion devotee might eventually happily settle for a billion more. Indeed, the initial \$10 billion might have served as a clever ploy, an opening move known to be unrealistic and designed to achieve a less ambitious outcome.

Government decisionmaking can never be the mechanical aggregation of individual appetites. Decisions require horse-trading and settling for less than the ideal; yet this vital aspect of rational policymaking lies beyond the poll. The political process cannot

be mimicked by statistically manipulating the data. If the entire sample were physically assembled and told to reach a majority judgment on the various survey items, the outcomes would scarcely resemble the first off-the-cuff opinions given in the typical survey.

No Tradeoffs

Choosing policy requires attention to tradeoffs. Conspicuously absent from most polls is the extractive side of the ledger. The polling format thus differs profoundly from ordering items over the Internet, since adding goodies to one's polling shopping cart cannot bump the final bill upward. No Congressional Budget Office annoys benevolent interviewees by announcing huge deficits should their gluttony continue. Nor, for that matter, are the lucky respondents in any way obligated to balance their goodheartedness with statutory fiscal limits. The questionnaire thus serves as a credit card with no limits, no interest, no payments until the year 3000; best of all, one's credit application cannot be declined.

Choosing policy also requires concrete numbers. Even a superficial glance at typical entitlement questions in polls reveals an indifference to concrete figures. That is hardly trivial, politically, unless one assumes that any figure is equal to any other. Pollsters typically ask about "more" or "less" spending and rarely push respondents to offer precise figures. What, for example, might be meant by the wish to spend "more" money to combat AIDS? Ten million dollars? A billion dollars? A hundred billion? Take the average, even if it includes outlandish sums such as a trillion dollars? Just imagine what would happen if legislators introduced vague bills calling for "more spending" for highways but "less" for foreign aid. Yet that is what leaders are being "advised" to do by the oft-repeated polls.

The issue is not whether goodhearted citizens crave the familiar "free lunch." Undoubtedly, the "something for nothing" mentality exists. More important, contemporary polling conventions scarcely ever mention taxes. Imagine what would happen if super-

markets decided to remove price tags since this disconcerting information ruins an otherwise enjoyable outing. To further enhance the rapture of shopping, the stores would not draw up a bill. Customers would merely be vaguely told that the bill "would be paid." Many would accept this open invitation to go wild in the aisles. Most others, however, would surely grow anxious as their shopping carts filled with expensive merchandise. After a point, most would say, "Okay, I've had my fun, but what is this extravagance going to cost?" Such reckoning rarely occurs in the compassion-friendly world created by the poll.

Moreover, pollsters rarely get it right when they try to attach costs to public benefits. As anyone completing a tax return knows, it is one thing to offer \$100 for an attractive nostrum, quite another to add \$100 to *one's existing tax bill*. Some context is needed to help taxpayers understand the question. Imagine that the pollster explained that the average American taxpayer already pays about \$6,000 annually in federal taxes and that every "spend-more" will increase that burden, and then calculated the generous respondent's new total tax burden—public benevolence might quickly evaporate.

Occasional cost probes raise doubts about pollsters' grasp of fiscal matters. For example, a 1992 Gallup Poll asked if the respondent might pay an extra \$200 to combat air pollution. With 114 million 1992 tax returns, such a taxpayer gift would generate an extra \$22.8 billion, or a fourfold increase in the entire Environmental Protection Agency budget. Furthermore, fighting air pollution is only one EPA responsibility. Imagine an EPA official testifying before Congress and insisting that the agency's annual budget be quadrupled, with all the extra funding going only to fight air pollution. It would be embarrassing for everyone, to say the least.⁵

Lack of Knowledge

Choosing policy requires some knowledge about a subject. Problems begin with the sheer size of government: many citizens grow befuddled by the costs associated with programs.

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For example, in my own recent research, I sought to solicit public opinion about two of President Clinton's legislative proposals: government subsidies for local education and child care. Within each of those large fields, I zeroed in on two narrower legislative proposals ostensibly promising government-created progress: assistance to reduce classroom size by hiring more teachers and a multifaceted child-care assistance plan. Those propositions had gained entrance to the legislative arena plus extensive media coverage. The purpose of the survey was to elicit "policy choices" from respondents rather than mere wishes or preferences. The instrument was expressly tilted toward better-educated respondents. Except for the overrepresentation of the better educated, the sample was a virtual mirror image of the population with regard to sex, race, age, and region. The sample was thus entirely national. Questionnaire data on political proclivity—partisan affiliation, 1996 vote, and ideological viewpoint—also display a close similarity to standard accounts.⁶

After the survey was completed, I asked interviewers to characterize how respondents wrestled with exceedingly large dollar figures. The interviewers repeatedly commented that confusion over million versus billion was commonplace, and the actual data similarly suggested unfamiliarity with terms like "a hundred billion." For all practical purposes, with this format, the total requested "national budget" depends largely on the number of enticements. Conceivably, the patient interviewee could say "spend more" on hundreds of worthy ventures, all devised by compassionate investigators ever-attentive to causes needing assistance.

Polls revealing widespread public ignorance of everything from constitutional rights to elementary geography have become staples. Public opinion texts establish that awareness drops dramatically as probes shift from prominent personalities to the details of public policy.⁷ Even devotees of poll-driven democracy acknowledge those deficiencies.

This demonstrated insufficiency is forgotten when citizens pronounce on complex

social welfare quandaries. What permits pollsters to confidently assert both that citizens scarcely can navigate Social Security arcana, that most citizens seek greater program funding, and that this mandate is worth heeding? One unsatisfactory solution is to accept citizens' assurances that they are, indeed, competent to pronounce. In the esteemed National Elections Studies conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, a modicum of competence is imputed to those passing a filter question regarding mere interest in the topic.

Less common is simply accepting the respondent's assurances. One Social Security question repeated 16 times between 1973 and 1994 by two highly renowned firms was, "In general, how well informed are you about Social Security—that is the benefits available, who is and is not covered, and so on? Would you say you are very well informed, fairly well informed, not too well informed, or not at all informed?" In 1994 some 16 percent of respondents claimed to be "very well informed" and another 44 percent said they were "fairly well informed." Significantly, no snap quiz ensued to verify that self-classification, an easily executable task.

An especially pernicious problem is public ignorance about existing programs. Let's start with dollar figures. When assessing public generosity or cheapness the pollster never says something like, "At the end of fiscal 1996 the Old Age and Survivors Insurance trust fund component of Social Security had an asset balance of \$514 billion.⁸ How many more dollars would you like to add?" Pollsters always assume in these endless "more/same/less" questions that respondents possess a firm grasp of the fiscal status quo. That is demonstrated nonsense. Most people are clueless about federal outlays by program, even judged by the most generous standards.

To see how this misinformation can play havoc, consider what various (hypothetical) health care desires might have meant in 1996 when the federal government spent \$336.6 billion on health care.⁹ Keep in mind that the

poll does not explain existing spending levels, let alone category allocations. Ms. A, who endlessly frets over her well-being, erroneously believes that the federal government dispenses only \$100 billion on medical care and, since she wants that sum tripled, pronounces “increase” to the pollster. By contrast, Mr. B is terrified by soaring taxes and wrongly believes that Washington is wasting a trillion dollars on quackery. He prefers that the sum be cut in half to \$500 billion; so he advises, “reduce.” In this plausible example, our “increase spending” respondent desires a funding reduction and our budget slasher demands a hefty jump. Without precise figures, anything and everything is possible. *It is impossible to discern an intelligible message about increases or decreases unless the baseline is known, and polls almost never provide such critical data.*

Confusion is inevitable about the meaning of “health care,” “assisting education,” “helping the homeless,” and the like. Typical questionnaire items assume universal understanding of complicated entities. An especially vexing expenditure category is “military spending.” No doubt, B-2 bombers, submarines, and the like immediately spring to mind when the “military spending” question arises. Yet, as defenders of the military’s budget will correctly argue, the modern military encompasses far more than weaponry. The services have evolved into significant social welfare instruments providing education, day care, health care, retirement income, and other social ministrations normally associated with Health and Human Services and other social welfare agencies. Do foes of military spending wish to abolish hundreds of Army day care centers? Slash military pensions? We cannot know if we simply ask about “military spending.”

This example is hardly atypical. Imagine a hardheaded questionnaire writer seeking a policy choice from the public about enhanced federal funding for education. He or she would reject the endless parade of “should the federal government do more (or less, or the same) to assist education?” Why? Put bluntly, polls here are asking citizens to

buy high-priced pigs in murky pokes. The consumer equivalent would be an automobile salesperson who offered “a car” without divulging details or even price. If shoppers asked the salesperson for details, the response would be, “Just try to do the best you can.” No business would survive with such generic practices, yet this is what pollsters offer the public.

Pollsters seldom mention public befuddlement about modern policymaking. Such confusion is hardly a badge of civic shame. How many political scientists, for example, could explain Medicare if suddenly interrogated? Most would demand a few days for further study (and maybe a grant too), and even ordinary citizens might rise to the occasion if patiently tutored. The innate capacity of citizens is not the issue here. Modern polling can give us back only what citizens know the moment the phone rings.

No Risks

An awareness of the risks associated with policy alternatives should inform policy choice. Obviously, even motherhood nostrums can turn sour. The phrase “urban renewal” (and myriad other anti-poverty failures) should instantly conjure up the right image on this point. If poll results are to guide sensibly, those proffering advice should first be quizzed to see if they grasp the attendant risks. Who wants advice from Pollyanna? Alas, this vital measure is virtually unknown in contemporary surveys. No interviewer prudently inquires, “Would you still support aiding the homeless if assistance made matters worse?” Pollsters, evidently, live in a Shangri-La where runaway entitlement programs and similar predictable policy nightmares are unknown.

This demonstrated insufficiency reveals nothing about cognitive talent. Each of the Pollyannaish respondents could doubtlessly wax eloquent about the risks of, say, living in Newark, New Jersey, or buying a reconditioned Pinto. However, such caution is highly unlikely to inform responses to poll questions about social welfare. If no attention is

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paid to risk, the policy advice of the polled should be treated skeptically.

Americans are hardly dunces, but we cannot expect informed advice when people are suddenly confronted with policy choices that frustrate experts. Thousands of Social Security experts cannot agree on whether increased funding is the answer, so why should we expect surprised telephone interviewees to be any wiser? It is not a matter of democracy unless one defines this term in the most mechanical, plebiscitory way. The debate centers on who is qualified to render recommendations on exceedingly difficult choices. Does the nation benefit when policy choices follow mere preferences and wishes? Policy choice by polls seems to preclude policies guided by informed choice.

Improving the Vox Populi?

Current poll methodology is clearly incapable of extracting sound policy counsel. That inability does not, of course, end the matter: improvement is always possible. Might there be cause for optimism? Hardly. The plebiscitory future looks bleak, regardless of heartfelt intent or prodigious investment. The conventional poll is *inherently* unsuited to making policy choices regardless of expert claims to the contrary. Moreover, all the proffered “new and improved” possibilities, such as deliberative polling, or untold electronic variants are probably even less adequate. The culprits are not the familiar bugaboos of interviewee honesty, loaded questions, shoddy sampling, and all the other well-examined technical impediments. Even if those obstacles were conquered, the barriers would remain formidable. If judicious policymaking is the objective, the representative legislative assembly, not the sample, is the appropriate model. A poll—regardless of how brilliantly executed—can never mimic a legislature.

The Economics of Polling

To appreciate why surveys cannot transform public utterances into sage policy counsel, the place to begin is polling industry eco-

nomics. All survey organizations (including academic ones) must monitor the bottom line. Getting the public’s two cents is expensive, and going beyond “quick-and-dirty” polling may be prohibitively uneconomical. Though modern technology (especially the telephone) has sharply reduced costs, even the most perfunctory technically acceptable study exceeds \$20,000. The price tag for a quality poll, one with lengthy face-to-face interrogations conducted by specially trained interviewers, can easily exceed \$100,000.¹⁰ Even at that price most of the questions would be imperfect off-the-shelf items. Developing a fresh survey cosmology of original questions would probably exceed that sum considerably.

For most customers, an extensive and expensive poll offers poor return on the additional outlay. It would be as if General Motors sold a superquality, hand-made \$95,000 Chevy to compete with a \$20,000 assembly-line version that was nearly as good. Since the mass media can only spend so much per poll, why sell a gold-plated, vastly superior product to an indifferent public? Nor will anyone care that the vox populi now speaks brilliantly. The bottom line is, indeed, the bottom line. Given that few polling industry executives express serious reservations about product quality, that nobody sues on behalf of those harmed by defective polls, and that money is always tight, the incentive for peeking beyond crude shadows is virtually nil.

This frugality results in a pervasive dumbing down of the entire enterprise. The typical telephone solicitation virtually precludes conveying information indispensable to rendering an informed judgment. Hugely complex issues become catch phrases, so even advice from a philosopher king would be garbled. Disputes over scientific research agendas, hospital construction, tax deductions, drug patent protection, subsidized doctor training, patient rights, and insurance regulation are all collapsed into “government assistance for medical care.”

Even if vital information was dutifully

communicated to respondents, today's telephone poll is unlikely to engender heightened sophistication. The telephone format is inherently unsuited to conveying prodigious, unfamiliar detail on subjects boring to most respondents. How many respondents can patiently listen as interviewers drone on about essential technical details? Who can accurately recollect it all after the first few minutes? What if the respondent quite correctly says, "This is so momentous, I'd like to think about it for a few days, get some additional information, and discuss it with others more expert than myself"? Surveys that impose heavy information burdens on respondents will surely depress already low participation rates even further, and one might assume that those who did participate would hardly be typical.

Getting beyond vacuous inquiries also requires prodigious homework for questionnaire writers, another expense that does not necessarily yield a more marketable product. Oscar Wilde once quipped that socialism would never work since it occupied too many evenings. Ditto for intelligent poll queries: they demand too much effort. If pollsters want to improve themselves, they will acquire more technical skills, not investigate the issues they ask about. My own research mentioned earlier dealt with two specific policies (hiring more teachers and subsidized day care) and required more than 100 hours digging up arcane documentation before the questionnaire was constructed. Policy expertise is most likely an unaffordable luxury for today's pollsters.

Second-Best Choices

A series of polling experiments dealing with racial integration, conducted during the 1950s, shows the possibility of ascertaining nonoptimal preferences.¹¹ The researchers' aim was not to uncover each respondent's most favored position (the nominal goal of the traditional survey) but to classify views into finely differentiated arrays of "oppose," "indifferent," or "favor." For example, somebody fervently wanting unqualified integra-

tion might, nevertheless, also be willing to accept integration of only public facilities and housing. The political relevance of ascertaining second- or third-best desires should be obvious. It is here—in the realm of the less than ideal—that real-world politics typically transpires.

One study collected 114 statements drawn from real-world discussions (as opposed to the investigator's imagination) of integration. Each study participant then sorted every statement into respondent-defined piles ranging from the most to the least preferred. There were large differences in how each statement was perceived. The responses of strongly pro-civil rights African-American students and anti-integration whites, seemingly distinct groups, were lumped together into a few categories. Interestingly, black students found few statements even minimally acceptable and insisted on keeping with their elemental groupings even when specifically asked to expand their classification. Others saw far more precise gradations.¹²

Consider how this approach might apply to other issues. Instead of the global "more/less/same" federal assistance probe, respondents to questions about health care would sort propositions drawn from ongoing debates, many of which were gradients of similar nostrums (for example, modifying tax deductions for prescription drugs by \$200 increments). Each person could construct a rather personalized wish list, but now those wants would include suboptimal desires. Such a subtle procedure might suggest to researchers complex (and more useful) conclusions, such as, "While a handful of respondents wants to expand the Medicare prescription deductible by \$500 and an equal number seek to abolish it altogether, most Americans can live with a \$50 to \$60 reduction in the deductible." Similarly nuanced characterizations would apply to other key policy details. The range of publicly "acceptable" options might encompass everything on the legislative table though, to be sure, some picks would be judged superior to oth-

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ers. In this way, public opinion might inform a politics that would truly be the art of the possible.

Unfortunately, this potentially illuminating technique has disappeared into the attic right next to slide rules and Bomar Brain calculators. Here, again, the costs of producing and administering questions would be high. Equally troublesome is the bulkiness of the presentation to both the interviewee and the consumer. The valuable richness afforded respondents and researchers would hardly garner media attention—no small commercial consideration.¹³

Tradeoffs

Forcing respondents to make the most elementary tradeoffs is even harder than presenting second-best choices. What is effortlessly executed when marching down supermarket aisles becomes a nightmare on the telephone. Congress itself navigates tradeoffs across hundreds of policies only with difficulty, and it too would run wild save for the constraints imposed by budgets. Yet, without the multiple “butter versus guns” dilemmas, a poll merely affords welfare gourmands a lavish buffet. The most important thing is to impose opportunity costs instead of proffering an enticement parade.

The sheer number of competing choices that must be executed if the final outcome is to be judged realistic is a particularly serious obstacle. Even the simplest budgetary classification entails more than a dozen categories, and one can only fantasize how this exercise could be cogently presented to unsophisticated interviewees.

Even if this Herculean labor can somehow be accomplished, how are we to interpret the final outcomes? What if, as seems likely, the allocations contravened statutory obligations or radically shifted commitments in nonsensical ways? Again, the public’s unfamiliarity with existing policy (including existing legal pledges) rears its ugly head. Making laborious tradeoffs demands a degree of proficiency, but proficiency, by itself, hardly guarantees wise counsel. After all, a child

spending \$10 at the supermarket will surely be highly constrained, and, in his or her own way, will render hierarchical outcomes. Yet, equally likely, the purchases will be nutritionally puny. How do we appraise a public “mandate” for spending, say, \$500 billion on health care, \$500 billion on education, and \$100 million on defense? Must the interviewer intercede with, “You just can’t reduce the defense budget to \$100 million, so let’s get real.” Try explaining to those “experts” that choices routinely lie only at the margin and that certain minimums are currently inescapable.

The atomistic poll also escapes the formidable aggregation problem implicit in majority rule.¹⁴ Conceivably, a “what do you want?” poll might find the desire for expanding health care spending scattered about from a few million to hundreds of billions of dollars. That diversity might gratify the pollster as the most exact picture possible, but standards of majority agreement remain totally unsatisfied. How is this to be achieved? In legislatures, the answer is simple (at least in principle): bargaining and horse-trading. Unfortunately, that is physically impossible unless, of course, the telephone interviewer adds, “Here are the other 900 survey participant names; and why don’t you contact them and see if you can work together at reaching a majority?”

Naturally, a majority can be manufactured by the researcher either through the design of the initial instrument (e.g., allowing only two choices) or with postinterview statistical computations. In a pinch, the median might be presented as a “public mandate.” Though acceptable to today’s conventions, this tactic is but a *deus ex machina*. Collective decisions are rarely derived by mechanically aggregating isolated individual first choices, especially when deals must be struck across multiple policy domains. Differences in priorities, intensities, negotiating skills, and other pertinent elements could, conceivably, yield a final outcome that was disagreeable to everyone and yet gained a majority. The public mandate is not the sum of its individual parts, and can

never be, the pollster's democratic rhapsodizing notwithstanding.

The perplexities awaiting those seeking to impose even minimal tradeoff discipline are truly horrendous. During the 1970s a bevy of investigators sought to conquer this predicament with an experimental device called a "budget pie." The exercise appeared simple enough: Participants received a fixed amount of play money and then were asked to make allocations across sundry government services. In one particularly realistic exercise, borrowing by going into debt or cutting taxes by returning poker chips to the investigator was possible. Ample opportunities existed to assist befuddled respondents. Experiments entailed small groups, physically assembled, dealing with tangible dollars (albeit of the play variety), all under the researcher's watchful eye. Policy categories were typically three to five, nobody was rushed, and expenditures were for such humdrum services as fire and police protection.

Nevertheless, the budget pie as a method has virtually vanished. Ample simplification, investigator helpfulness, and all the rest proved insufficient to inspire many respondents to mimic grocery shoppers. In retrospect, that is hardly surprising—even a brilliant supermarket maestro is probably clueless when asked about police protection vis-à-vis highway construction vis-à-vis education. Quite likely, if that consumer joined the city council, he or she would learn the ropes, but, without realistic training (and inescapable institutional constraints), carving up a municipal budget is perplexing. Equally predictable, even modest proficiency was powerfully linked to education and social class. One study reported that only about half the sample of low-income respondents could navigate a three-part budget pie dealing with policing.¹⁵

Willingness to Pay

The problem of tradeoffs has another dimension. Consider the supermarket again. By definition, consumers are willing to pay for what they take to the cash register. Their

shopping carts are filled after a series of hard choices, and their selections are valuable for society precisely because they reflect tradeoffs. The willingness to pay for groceries reveals a real choice, rather than a simple wish. Similarly, a willingness to pay for a policy bespeaks serious advice about policy. Can polls find out if citizens are willing to pay for their chosen policies? There are many obstacles to that goal.

First, ascertaining true policy costs is difficult. Entitlements are notoriously susceptible to vagaries in demography, technology, immigration, economic circumstances, and untold other uncontrollable factors. Few entitlements turn out to be cheaper than originally forecast. How do we interpret polls indicating a sincere willingness to pay for underpriced benefits? Equally well-known are nostrums whose true costs are consciously underestimated to garner legislative support. President Clinton's education plan, it will be recalled, ignored essential construction outlays and teacher-hiring incentives. Pricing entitlements is part of the political conflict, and it may be unwise to expect pollsters to navigate this quandary.

A more philosophical reservation concerns exactly what is meant by respondent generosity. Looming over all discussions of willingness to pay (or WTP, as it is commonly abbreviated in the economics literature) is the assumption that fiscal earnestness is valid on its face, that is, agreeing to pay means agreeing to pay. But not every charitable pledge is honored, and interviewers do not collect taxes. Stripped of consequentiality, endless "spend more" responses may represent only some vague "do something about the problem" sentiment.

The most impressive attempt to measure citizen willingness to fund a desired policy goes by the name of contingent valuation method (CVM). The common feature of CVM projects is attention to a single project's minute details prior to presenting the bill. Respondents may receive information about prevailing outlays, various funding stratagems, and available substitutes and similar

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itemized data needed for a well-formed choice. Respondents may also learn the risks of a policy (including increased costs as a result of forgoing expenditures entirely) and might grade the status quo in terms of its minimal acceptability. One especially detailed investigation of cleaning up waterways for recreational use even painstakingly reviewed how this legislative goal was to be accomplished.¹⁶

The CVM technique tends to be exceedingly demanding. Participants in the water quality study, for example, not only were made aware of current dollar outlays; the costs of possible improvements were also presented in terms of their *personal* added tax burden. Even more remarkable, this individualized approach was also applied to other government functions. Now everyone knew how a water improvement project would affect spending for police protection or highway construction (among other services). Work sheets offered incremental expenditure combinations, each yielding a unique benefit-to-cost ratio. The final WTP figure was arrived at slowly through a method akin to completing a complicated tax return. Choices could be altered as new information arose, and the “no tax increase” response was always available.¹⁷

The greatest strength of CVM—its attentiveness to realistic details and rigor—is also its greatest deficiency. CVM is exceedingly uninviting to contemporary, cost-conscious practitioners. Like budget pies, the apparatus translates poorly into the telephone format. CVM would drive down survey participation rates (already low), and those who did participate would not be representative Americans. How many erstwhile citizen-advisers have the patience required to follow all the laborious instructions, let alone repetitive paper-and-pencil computational exercises? Moreover, the technique is executed one issue at a time, so each issue requires a fresh survey.¹⁸

Educating Respondents

Experience with adding information to polls is not encouraging. Citizens are gener-

ally uninterested in being better informed, boredom quickly replaces initial enthusiasm, and attracting fresh voices (e.g., the poor, excluded minorities) is a severe challenge.¹⁹ That nearly all poll enhancement efforts have vanished despite sponsor enthusiasm and ample resources speaks loudly about the futility of this crusade. One might also note the difficulty of boiling down immense issues to digestible snippets. A five-minute talk on government-subsidized medical care might quadruple public wisdom, but would that improvement be consequential, given the issue's true complexity? Furthermore, who will guarantee the fairness of the presentation, assuming that it is possible to construct a balanced presentation. Moreover, as any policy expert will attest, debate often centers on the information itself or on expert projections. Who is to say that “expert” analyses are as neutral as claimed?

Far more consequential is the public's reluctance to grasp policy intricacies. The possibility of teaching the public is always assumed but never demonstrated. Even if all the necessary information could be transmitted to respondents willing to be tutored, that would only set the stage for wise counsel. It cannot be presupposed that fresh knowledge can be fashioned into an intelligent judgment. Consider, for example, the ubiquitous matter of government health care assistance. Obviously, the concrete choices are not between government aid and no aid across dozens of social welfare policies. Intervention is a foregone conclusion. The debate transpires at the extreme margin; for example, how tax deductions for prescription drugs or government reimbursements for exotic medical procedures are to be treated. Documenting cravings for “more” help is irrelevant, given that every advanced nostrum, technically, uses government authority to improve health care. This immensely complicated subject would have to be communicated in an upgraded survey.

Can citizens ever navigate these abstruse issues, even if the communication obstacle is overcome and patient respondents receive expert guidance? Probably not, sad to say.

Pollsters are unlikely to succeed where schools (even colleges) routinely fall short. Why should people bewildered by endlessly repeated elementary civics lessons suddenly master the connection between patent law protection and research funding? Can ordinary citizens appreciate the nonobvious fact that huge tax credits assist the rich, not the destitute, even when fully explained? To expect sudden curiosity and attentiveness to public affairs is unrealistic. Ironically, those academics so casually optimistic about upgrading ordinary citizen awareness often despair at their students' (often at elite schools) underwhelming ability to grasp sophisticated policy analysis.

Risks

Conveying risks to ordinary citizens via a poll is another huge stumbling block. Superficially, the conventional poll appears adequate to this assignment—one might, for example, offer odds with every policy choice. A question about expanding Medicare might now include a warning that there is a one-in-three chance that this generosity might be more costly than anticipated, or a one-in-five chance that fraud will burgeon. This is hardly inconsequential since the mere mention of risk inevitably shapes results. For example, a 1999 ABC News poll²⁰ asked about sending troops to Kosovo if the air campaign failed. Though 57 percent of respondents endorsed this proposal as stated, endorsements fell to 44 percent when the risk of “some casualties” was introduced. When the risk rose to “a thousand casualties,” endorsement plummeted to 26 percent.

Though seemingly effortless, this “add-a-risk” element is arduous in the customary survey. Two obstacles immediately come to mind. The first is technical: establishing the precise odds for any outcome. This is a political minefield, to say the least, and using any one set of plausible figures instead of another might dramatically alter public preferences. Just imagine respondents' being asked, “Would you still support government prescription drug price controls even if there was a reasonable—say a

one-in-three—chance that this would reduce new drug development?” Who can say if this assessment is accurate, or what “reasonable” should signify? No doubt, proponents of price controls would find this wording and risk estimate objectionable and dismiss the results as rubbish. The vox populi would soon degenerate into a Tower of Babble as each interest group sponsored polls with its own “reasonable” risk assessment.

A more vexing problem is the public's ability to comprehend risk that exceedingly rare, though highly momentous, events may occur. Innumerable policy choices—transportation safety, pollution toxicity, medical risk, crime victimization, and even gun accident probabilities—exhibit this trait. After all, pursuing perfection in safety or cleanliness entails nothing more than moving from “extremely unlikely” to “highly improbable.”²¹ Given that most people have trouble grasping large numbers, the task of addressing risk in polls appears hopeless.

Can polls be improved so that they provide a reliable guide for policymakers? The answer is no. The economics of polling would not support the extensive measures that would be needed to make polls worthwhile for policy choice. If the money were available, participants would not be: the demands on respondents would be immense. Consequently, polling is not likely to provide useful information to policymakers any time soon.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that contemporary polls are seducing respondents, not offering them hard choices of the type faced by legislatures or policy analysts. Given the typical survey's inattention to costs, indifference to risk, and other shortcomings, it is a miracle that polls do not find unanimous support for more social spending. Polls do not provide worthwhile advice about policy; they measure only wishes for a world of benefits with no costs.

Polling has crossed the line between

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mechanically recording popular sentiments and becoming a political player. The question, “Whom do you admire most?” is absolutely harmless; by contrast, “Should the federal government spend more on the homeless?” can be highly mischievous. Assuming that two-thirds of the public will endorse this benevolent outreach, a fresh “fact” is created—the public desires something, and since democracy means heeding the vox populi, let’s act! Should this “fact” be regularly publicized, the pollster has brought into being “a consensus” that will surely attract opportunistic office seekers, and those who caution restraint will now be on the defensive.²²

If contemporary polls are poor guides to policymaking and we have no reason to believe they can be improved, where do we go from here? Must we surrender to those pollsters ever willing to seduce the public with appealing nostrums that quickly become “programs” to opportunist office seekers?

A successful battle against facile entreatments must address the way polls are used, not the surveys themselves. Absolutely nothing can impede the issuance of unreflective cravings, but this analysis challenges their standing as “wise democratic counsel.”²³ Abstract cravings for public largesse should be treated as “interesting curiosities”; under no circumstances should they inform policymaking or determine policy choices.

Notes

1. James Madison thus counterposes pure democracy and representative government: “The two great points of difference between a Democracy and a Republic are, first, the delegation of the Government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest: secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.” Madison believed the new American republic was a representative government. He believed representative government was less likely than direct democracy to decline into factions and civil war. See James Madison, *Federalist* no. 10 in *The Founders’ Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), vol. 1, p. 130.

2. See Steven Kull, *Expecting More Say: The American Public on Its Role in Government* (Washington: Center on Policy Attitudes, 1999).

3. Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 249.

4. Walter Bagehot, *National Review*, July 1856, from *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), p. 597.

5. Such inattentiveness to “reality” is not rare. One careful study of 51 questions dealing with the Panama Canal Treaty found that 10 of the questions contained factual errors such as wrongly characterized treaty provisions or misstated historical details. Unfortunately, results from the flawed questions found their way into congressional debates over ratification. See Ted J. Smith III and J. Michael Hogan, “Public Opinion and the Panama Canal Treaties of 1977,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 5–30.

6. The tilt toward education in the sample is clear: 14 percent of respondents had postgraduate degrees compared to 7 percent of the general population. By contrast, a mere 5 percent of those interviewed had some high school or less versus 18 percent of the general population. All interviews were conducted by Angus Reid Associates of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. For more details about this study, see Robert Weissberg, “Voracious Appetites: Public Opinion and Big Government,” University of Illinois, 2000.

7. A useful compilation of such ignorance is Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996). Chapter 2 in particular shows widespread unfamiliarity with the federal government’s fiscal commitments, legislative initiatives, and elementary demographic information. To be sure, on some items (e.g., the passage of a new minimum wage or the federal savings and loan bailout), awareness was surprisingly abundant. But rooting through mounds of poll data for examples is not the point. What is essential is the alignment of poll queries with appropriate information levels. A citizen ignorant of 99 of 100 things might still offer wise counsel if the question pertained to his one area of knowledge.

8. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1998), Table 381.

9. *Ibid.*, Table 167.

10. During the early stages of my own research I

solicited cost estimates from one prestigious survey organization for 500 face-to-face interviews in a single metropolitan area. Part of the expense entailed developing new ways to probe complex social welfare views. The proffered cost estimate was \$160,000, a sum well beyond my budget.

11. These are summarized in Carolyn W. Sherif, Muzafer Sherif, and Roger E. Nebergall, *Attitude and Attitude Change: The Social Judgment-Involvement Approach* (Philadelphia: W.B. Sanders, 1965).

12. These are summarized in *ibid.*, chap. 4.

13. This technique is also notable for its incompatibility with modern statistical analyses. If simple descriptive portrayals are the only requirement, only clutter poses a problem. But, if more sophisticated multivariate techniques are to be applied, the computational challenge is sizable. This drawback looms large in the contemporary academy where elaborate computation exercises drive professional prestige. Imagine statistically analyzing items where scale interval and number varied across respondent. In other words, some respondents employed a 5-part metric, others used 10 categories, and so on and on. And, to boot, rather than the researcher's grouping similar items, respondents themselves made those categorizations; many might be idiosyncratic or even nonsensical. The Procrustean bed of convention may violate reality, but it is practical. Again, the methodological tail wags the substantive dog.

14. Translation of autonomous individual preference into a collective, majority-based outcome is, of course, a theoretical problem of the first order that has provided full employment to untold public choice practitioners. A reasonably succinct and nontechnical analysis of this dilemma can be found in William H. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1988), especially chap. 10.

15. John P. McIvor and Elinor Ostrom, "Using Budget Pies to Reveal Preferences: Validation of a Survey Instrument," *Policy and Politics* 41 (1976): 87–110. Significantly, well-educated, affluent respondents displayed similar troubles when the exercise was presented via a telephone poll. Here about a quarter of the respondents could not complete a five-item budget involving basic city services. That performance level is roughly the same as what our research uncovered. See Peter J. May, "A Technique for Measuring Preferences for Spending Reductions," *Social Indicators Research* 10, no. 10 (1981): 389–405.

16. Robert Cameron Mitchell and Richard T. Carson, *Using Surveys to Value Public Goods: The Contingent Valuation Method* (Washington: Resources for the Future, 1989), chap. 1.

17. CVM studies have also sought realism by consciously selecting respondents who have had actual policy encounters. Again, a far cry from today's polls permitting ordinary folk to "acquire" billion-dollar anti-missile defense systems. Research on WTP for wilderness recreation, for example, had hunters and hikers from Maine navigate these arduous choices and financial allocations. Dollar figures were kept plausible—a dollar or two a day to enjoy a local lakeside marina—as opposed to, say, unspecified immense expenditures for "the environment." At least according to the technique's proponents, when all the interviewee traits and experiences are compared with their expressed dollar commitments, the assessment process appears economically rational. Mitchell and Carson, chap. 1.

18. Other practical obstacles are substantial. CVM demands an enormous researcher effort in customizing questionnaire items and, frequently, adjusting dollar figures to individual respondents. Polling firms would assuredly have to hire policy experts and economists galore to determine, for example, what it personally costs each of 1,000 people to hire five new teachers in their home school districts. Collecting precise personal information of a type well beyond simple demographics likewise imposes heavy research burdens. Those requisite data may also be murky or even unknowable (e.g., accurate costs of projects years down the road). And the ideological pressures to underestimate costs (including risks) may be inescapable.

19. Upgrade schemes number in the hundreds, and more surface daily, yet each one repeats the shortcomings of its predecessors. A useful overview of the deliberative poll is offered by Daniel M. Merkle, "The National Issue Convention Deliberative Poll," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60 (Winter 1996): 588–619.

20. Gary Langer and Ben Fitzpatrick, "Tempered by Risk," ABCNEWS Poll, April 9, 1999, electronic version.

21. Making such colossal numbers meaningful to ordinary people is difficult. One survey asked about the humdrum matter of bus safety, namely about reducing mortality from 8 per 100,000 to 4 per 100,000, and, ultimately, to 1 per 100,000. See M. W. Jones-Lee, M. Hammerton, and R. R. Phillips, "The Value of Safety: Results from a National Survey," *Economic Journal* 95 (March 1985): 49–72.

22. Libertarian readers might at this point suggest a poll version of fighting fire with fire. Why not launch counter-polls to subvert the Washington colossus? To wit, when respondents are informed of gargantuan costs, dangerous risks, and the necessity of settling for less than

Utopia, devotion to government largesse cools. Now the survey might inquire, "Do you think the homeless problem should be left to local communities if Washington's assistance will only make it worse?" Surely the results would generally encourage those opposed to federalizing every societal disorder. Conceivably, a swarm of such items might eventually undermine the alleged welfare state consensus. Though tempting, this "my-poll-beats-the-hell-out-of-your-poll" strategy is impractical and, more important, disingenuous, despite its conformity to today's polling standards. Though the commercial pollster will happily pose those questions, people who hope to defeat today's pro-welfare consensus face a stacked deck. For one, industry stalwarts, including the vital academic wing, will remain quite comfortable with statist vox populi outpourings. While their opponents must scamper to fund their episodic poll salvos (at \$20,000 or more a shot), those at the controls (particularly in university settings) can easily repeat the standard, pro-statist item as hallowed convention.

Moreover, government itself supports the polling enterprise. As Johns Hopkins University political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg so forcefully argued, our current welfare colossus could not exist apart from widespread popular endorsement, and those who profit from it are deeply motivated to publicize this fact. It is a bureaucrat's dream to champion what the public fervently demands. See Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

23. The reader may falsely see me as a foe of democracy. The burden of this paper has been to show why polls should not be used to make policy choices. For that reason, I should be counted a critic of direct democracy, which in this case numbers the pollster among its friends. I do count myself a friend of representative democracy, which is antithetical to the rule of the pollster. A more general statement of my doubts about direct democracy through public opinion must await another occasion.

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