Touchpoint

Responsible polling in the wake of 9/11

By Gary Langer

There's a special onus on news pollsters these days. The events of September 11 and since comprise a touchpoint in history, one we'll be revisiting for generations. For both the present and the future, we need to mark it with a full and clear understanding of public opinion. And that means redoubling our efforts to get it right.

By and large we've done pretty well. Independent polling by news organizations and academic institutions during the past several months has painted a detailed and largely coherent picture of public response to the terrorist attacks and ensuing war.

But we haven't always met the mark. There have been weak questions and compromised methodologies, a lack of background or full context, and, most troubling from my point of view, a shortage of the thoughtful analysis that turns data into meaning.

When a national media poll headlines "an uptick" in positive ratings of the war effort that turns out to be a two-point change, I get the willies. When an Ivy League university headlines its poll with data from a subgroup consisting of 31 respondents, I get a little headache. When a medical journal publishes two-month-old findings on wartime stress, I wonder why it couldn't mention other data that are more current, and quite different.

When a news poll breaks a four-day sample into two-day slices, I wonder if it's exercised the sample management techniques that requires. I heave a sigh when we resort to manufactured trend, ask wild hypotheticals, conflate views of the president with views on the issues, offer unbalanced response options, or load questions with hot-button phrases.

And when we all clamber aboard the wagon of conventional wisdom—accepting on slim evidence, for instance, that Americans' trust in government has fundamentally changed—I think it's time to crack open the window and let in some fresh air.

We have done well. But we can, and should, do better.

It matters because of what it is we seek to learn. How has our nation reacted to these events? What do we see as our options—as the best and most appropriate response, at home and abroad? How do we view the tradeoffs that response may require? What are the roots of our preferences, and what is their apparent direction? These are fundamental questions in which we and our leaders have a pressing interest today, and from which history will draw its conclusions tomorrow. Their import compels us to get it right.

It's astonishing to me that some people—apparently even including some researchers—don't seem to want us to get it at all. When the second plane hit the south tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, my reflex was automatic: I picked up the phone, called my field house, TNS Intersearch, and told them we'd be polling that night.

I've since learned that participants in AAPORnet [the listserve of the American Association for Public Opinion Research] debated that day whether it was appropriate to go into the field; one likened it to "ambulance chasing." I couldn't disagree more. Measuring immediate public opinion at a time of crisis is meaningful and valuable. It chases away spin, speculation and punditry. It captures both personal reactions and policy preferences at a vital moment. And it lays down a baseline for the future.

Criticism of one-night polls as unreliable has long ago been discredited. Mountains of data demonstrate the stability and coherence of their findings, and indeed, in a breaking news environment, they have distinct advantages. Our one-night results on September 11, and again when we polled on September 13, have been confirmed and reinforced in every news poll since, ours and others', one-nighters and multi-nighters alike.

Of course, gathering the data is always just the start. It's not enough to point out that support for the war in Afghanistan was virtually unanimous. We need context, reaching back to show, for example, that "strong" support—at 83%—was 30 points higher than strong support for the Persian Gulf War was when it began on January 16, 1991.

Next we need to reach for the why of it—not just where opinion stands, but what informs it. Contrary to some of the punditry, a review of polling from previous conflicts shows that public support for military action is not a knee-jerk reaction. The case for action has to be made. Are vital US interests at stake? Is there a clear adversary, a defined plan of action? International consensus helps. A strong humanitar-

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ian rationale can be persuasive. But if one factor stands alone, it's a sense of threat to the United States—and that exists now at a level quite likely unseen since Pearl Harbor.

In my shop, this recognition caused us very quickly to watch our language. There was an initial tendency to describe public response to the attacks as a call for immediate "retribution," "retaliation," or even "revenge." But those impulses, essentially juvenile in nature, don't begin to do justice to the depth of public resolve we saw. It's not about retribution; it's about something much more fundamental, and that's self-defense.

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Data support this view. Early on we asked people what they thought posed a greater risk of further terrorism—if the United States responded militarily, or if it did not. By huge margins, Americans saw inaction as a greater risk than military action. Reducing risk, not striking back in anger, is what public support for the war is all about.

There are good data to counter many other nuggets of conventional wisdom. One is that Americans are willing to forfeit the civil rights, privacy and convenience of others, but not their own. Big majorities say they're willing for Americans to give up some privacy, but most people also say they don't want their own phones tapped. The easy leap is to say: Aha! Contradiction! Gotcha!

In fact, the weight of evidence is that people, again, hold a more mature and nuanced view. We'll accept encroachments on our rights and freedoms in this time of crisis, but only grudgingly. And we want those to be as targeted and well thought-out as possible. People don't want the government listening in on Aunt Sadie, not because she's got any secrets, but precisely for the opposite reason—it's just not an effective use of resources.

To get to reliable data to analyze, of course, we have to watch what we're asking. One question on civil rights asked people if, "in order to fight terrorism," they'd support or oppose allowing the police to "randomly stop people who may fit the profile of a suspected terrorist." The opening phrase, "in order to fight terrorism," has appeared in any number of questions in recent months, and it hits my ear like a positive pleading.

But I also wonder about the phrase "random police stops of people who fit the profile of a suspected terrorist." Hold on: if it's a random stop, it's not profiled. And if it's a profiled stop, it's not random. Nonetheless, this question created the notion, in some minds, that most people favor random stops of Arabs and Muslims—apparently taking the phrase "the profile of a suspected terrorist" as code. Our own polling produced a very different conclusion, finding majority opposition to targeted stops of Arabs and Muslims.

Response categories are worth watching. One national media poll asks people if they support x-and-x strongly, will accept it, or think it goes too far. That looks to me like two chances for a yes, but only one no. (This same outfit recently reported that the number of Americans who thought the war was going well had "ticked up" from 56 to 58%, while approval of the current US military action "also increased," from 86 to 88%.)

We've also seen questions that engage in hypotheticals or speculation—where do you think the anthrax came from? (How the hell would I know?) Do you favor putting immigrants in internment camps, or torturing suspects? Rather than dreaming up such notions, it seems a better use of resources to test measures that have actually been proposed, as Walter Mondale once said, "right here on Earth."

And to test them carefully. One national media poll asked about military tribunals in a question that used the word "secret" four times. Was that really necessary, or was it an unconscious example of Fourth-Estate, First-Amendment huffiness?

Another asked respondents to choose between "a non-public military tribunal in which the names of the defendants and the evidence is withheld" versus "the normal justice system." Do we really want to measure anything against "normal?"

Yet another asked about tribunals in a question that noted that George W. Bush backs the idea. That's a common pitfall, predating the current crisis; the problem is that it conflates opinion on the issue with opinion of the president.

Or try this one, a little exercise in moral outrage on detentions:

> Since September 11 the government has detained about 2,000 non-citizens and is holding them as material witnesses or on charges that normally wouldn't be grounds for keeping them in jail. The government has refused to give out their names, to say specifically what the charges are against them or to say how many of them have been released. Do you believe the gov-

ernment should give out more information about these detentions, or do you think the government has legitimate reasons for withholding it?

It's entirely one-sided, chock-full of criticisms of the detentions, with no balancing rationale. The amazing thing is that despite all that language, 71% supported the government's actions.

We also look out for manufactured trend, such as, "Have the events of September 11 made you more religious, or not?" That requires an impossible task of self-assessment. And it's so simple to do it right: find a straight, clean question that's been asked before, re-ask it and look for change.

Several polls have used this kind of retrospective question to try to predict travel traffic—asking people if they traveled last year, then asking if they'll travel this year. It doesn't work, partly because of the unreliability of self-reporting a year-old activity, and partly because our samples simply aren't precise enough. One such attempt put the number of 2000 holiday travelers at 21%; but when asked again a few weeks later, it put the answer at 16%. Ten million purported travelers went missing.

Timing bears close watching. One of the ongoing consumer confidence polls put out a release in late September—but without specifying that 88% of its interviews were done before September 11. On November 15, a medical journal published a survey finding high levels of self-reported stress after September 11. It concluded, "Clinicians should be prepared to assist people with trauma-related symptoms of stress." All well and good, except that the survey had been fielded two months earlier, September 14-16, and any number of more recent polls showed self-reported stress dramatically declining over the time that had passed.

An international polling association delivered bad questions *and* bad sampling in a single blow. It put out what was implied to be a collection of 30 national polls; the key question asked if the United States should attack the country harboring the terrorists, or just extradite the terrorists instead. This ignored the inconvenient fact that we have no extradition treaty with Afghanistan. The Pakistan poll looked interesting anyway—until we learned that it had been conducted in four cities comprising 10% of the country's population. This purported to represent Pakistani public opinion.

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Of course, we don't need to go abroad for sampling oddities. A recent poll of Arab Americans came from a six-year-old surname list. An Ivy League university released a survey on anthrax comparing the views of the general population to those of "postal worker households"; you had to ask to learn that the *n* for this subgroup, out of a sample of 1,000 adults, was 31. That's more "postal worker households" than I'd have expected; regardless, it's my own policy never to analyze a subgroup that'll fit in my living room.

A final example, which I mentioned above, is everything we've heard about how the public's basic view of government has changed since September 11. I don't buy it.

When you ask people if they trust the government to do what's right, the positive answers indeed have skyrocketed. But that old Michigan question is too vague to hang a change in fundamental worldview on it. Trust in government... to do what?

Try this: People long have trusted the government to do what's right in terms of defense and national security. And they've long distrusted the government to do what's right in terms of social policies and programs. What's changed is not the trust, but the subject, the frame of reference. In past years social policy was the main frame of reference, and trust was low. Today defense and security are the frame of reference—and trust is high. Events haven't changed people; they've simply changed the subject.

None of these assertions is absolute. We can come to different conclusions based on our best reading of the data we gather. And we all fall into some of the methodological and analytical traps I've described; scour ABC News polling and you'll find our fair share of clunkers. None of us will perform perfectly, which is why it's so important to have a variety of news pollsters out plowing the same field.

What's critical is that we all act with care—gathering our data honestly and well; examining them fully and thoughtfully; chasing bias and conventional wisdom out the door; reaching for new, independent approaches and fresh understandings; keeping sight of the limitations as well as the possibilities of our work; and, ultimately, producing the best, most cogent, most responsible, most thoughtful analysis of public opinion we can. The times demand no less.