

**A POLLING AGENDA FOR 1990: FOUR  
VIEWS FROM BUSINESS**

**"What would I like to see in opinion polls  
in 1990?"**

**By Jack Hamilton**

**More international data.** National, state and ZIP-code sampling makes sense for elective politics. But in the broader sense of politics as an instrument for various social and economic actions, many with international ramifications, opinions limited by borders can be distorting.

Certainly this is true of commerce. Commercial unity is growing between the United States and Canada. The United States and Mexico are growing closer economically, albeit not all in ways sanctioned. Trading opportunities grow with Europe, economically unifying and potentially expanding to the East. The highest growth rates are occurring in Asia-Pacific economies.

My company's corporate home office is in the United States, but more than 40 percent of our sales are outside the United States now—a figure that will probably rise to 50 percent within five years. My nearly 200-year-old American company is nearly 24-percent owned by a Canadian company. International trade, ownership, joint ventures, financial linkages and travel are lacing the world together.

Most public opinion data guiding Americans' understanding of how the world works is what Americans, as opposed to other peoples, believe. To be sure, ability and feasibility of sampling public opinion varies widely in different parts of the world, as does the influence of public opinion experts. Still, there are exciting possibilities—for example, alliances and exchanges among polling organizations—of providing pertinent comparative opinion data. Dissemination would advance political and economic understanding and economic opportunity.

**Fewer opinions of the few.** A poll of the opinions of, say, "top executives of the Fortune 500," is offered as the opinions of the corporate movers and shakers. Seriously, though, how many CEOs are taking their time to fill out the questionnaire or to respond to telephone interviews?

Claiming that one has captured the opinions of, say, Washington's influentials, by doing "in-depth, in-person interviews" with two news bureau chiefs, two senators, three representatives, four bureaucrats and five think tankers within the Beltway mocks sound research. Decisions ought not to be influenced and strategies based on such flimsy stuff.

Analysis of findings and percentages set in type tend to gain respectability, however inadequate or unrepresentative the data base. Cautions in the small type disappear in transmission. Pollsters are not responsible for client and public misuse of solid data they offer, but they ought to be responsible enough not to offer flawed goods.

**Deeper understanding of the solidity of opinion.** Some years ago, the old Yankelovich, Skelly and White firm developed a means of determining how strongly held and likely to persist were the opinions expressed by respondents. As I recall, there were five additional questions that had to be asked to determine strength and persistence of opinion. Yankelovich didn't do much with this great idea, because it was too expensive. That's too bad. A way of judging with some confidence whether snapshots of opinion are likely to fade in the sunlight of the next day would add greatly to the value of survey information.

**What kinds of people say what.** Good surveys usually come with demographics. But who said what is not always included in news media, advertising and public relations use of the data. Whose opinion by region, income, age, sex or other demographic variables is not always pertinent, of course. When it is pertinent, an editor's decision to leave it out may reflect simply considerations of space or time. But I would like to make a plea to that editor. Please consider the high value of including information on what kinds of people have given which opinions.

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**"What would I like to see in opinion polls  
in 1990?"**

**By William Greener**

**Looking for trends.** Almost every presentation of a given piece of survey research begins with a polling professional saying: "Remember, a survey is only a snapshot of what is reality at a specific moment in time...." As everyone recognizes, there is a substantial amount of truth to the statement.

This is what makes regular, ongoing survey research so very important. The opportunity is created to detect which dependent variable measurements are stable, almost regardless of changes in the environment. By the same token, the possibility is generated of determining which measurements are susceptible to small changes of circumstance. More than anything else, what this survey research customer wants is the chance to "see the numbers" on a series of constant matters over time. Together, a set of snapshots can create a rich landscape, and that is what is needed.

**Centers of public concern.** With a constant set of measurements, we need to probe more deeply into the issue clusters that have the attention of the American public—drugs, crime, and the environment. Is their ascendancy merely a reflection of the fact that, after more than eight years of uninterrupted economic expansion, Americans feel we have the time and resources needed to attend to these matters? Or, are these issues ones where public concern is so great that they would withstand a change in economic circumstances. Would they withstand a new world crisis?

**The environment.** In the past two or three years, the increase in the saliency of the environment has been nothing short of remarkable. However, anecdote, crisis, and trivial matters have far too often constituted the basis for that attention. Survey research can help reveal the possibilities for more serious discussion of environmental issues.

Instead of focus being given to items that we know are detrimental to human health (smoking, emissions from cars, etc.), we are constantly bombarded with news stories on chemicals "present in amounts that increase your chances of getting cancer." Of course, many times that "increase" amounts to something on the order of one in a million or less. Is it possible to shift the focus of debate to

the *real* risks to human health, or does the mere mention of cancer-risk mean that emotions will overwhelm any attempt at conveying comparative risk? After getting at the ability to engage in relative risk discussions, we should explore the matter of *who* is seen as speaking authoritatively on environmental issues and *how* false claims can be credibly challenged.

Finally, when it comes to the environment, we need help in establishing how to insert humans into the discussion. Sounds weird, but believe me, it is a genuine problem. Whenever the debate gets framed into preservation versus development, especially industrial development, the outcome is a given: Preservation-1, Development-0.

We all recognize that *some* development and growth are necessary if we are to preserve, much less enrich, our standard of living. However, the nation seems to have drifted to a point where actually generating this growth is difficult at a minimum and impossible at a maximum. What are the outlines of "responsible" growth? What trade-offs will the public accept? Surely, we ought to be able to achieve growth without the public believing it means turning Yellowstone into a theme park with a mall. How do we get it done? Polling can help.

So, my agenda for 1990 survey research is fairly simple and straightforward. First, do a reasonable amount of it at regular intervals, and measure the same thing lots of times. Second, attempt to get behind what is driving the current issue clusters that have seized the attention of the American public. Third, delve into the environmental area to help determine several things such as the possibilities for discussing relative risk, questioning the claims of "environmental" groups, and inserting humans into the debate. This may not seem to be a very ambitious agenda. With the information, however, those of us who are research customers will be in a much better position to advise our management on what can realistically be attempted on issues that truly impact on the proverbial bottom line.

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**"What would I like to see in opinion polls in 1990?"**

**By Lawrence A. Hunter**

**Social Security.** In spite of the 1983 reforms, the Social Security system remains flawed. Each year, the government collects billions of dollars more (\$50 billion more in 1990) in Social Security taxes than it requires to pay current benefits. In fact, every year between now and 2018, the government will collect excess Social Security taxes. Over the next 28 years, American workers will pay a total of \$3 trillion more in Social Security taxes than will be required to pay current retirement benefits. In spite of this fact, the Social Security system will run short of money to pay benefits in 2018—as the number receiving benefits rises sharply vis-a-vis the number of workers paying into the system.

The 1983 Social Security reforms were sold to the American public as putting the Social Security system on a sound financial basis well into the next century. The system was in such a state of collapse in 1983 and the public was so misinformed about the true nature of the reforms that voters were scared into going along with the massive tax increases that accompanied the reforms. However, even while consenting to the reforms, most Americans remain skeptical that Social Security will be there when they retire. For example, when baby boomers are asked whether they believe they will receive their full Social Security benefits upon retirement, 60 percent respond, no.

As the baby boom generation begins seriously to plan for their retirement, Social Security will become the preeminent domestic policy issue of the 1990s. At the top of the polling agenda should be an effort to determine how informed Americans are about the Social Security system, how they view the system, and how they would like to see it reformed.

**The federal deficit.** There is a well articulated disagreement between Democratic and Republican politicians regarding the causes and cures of persistent federal budget deficits. In general, the Democrats contend that deficits are the result of the Reagan tax cuts and can only be cured by a tax increase. Alternatively, most Republicans contend that excessive federal spending is the cause of persistent deficits and that deficits can be eliminated by restraining the growth of spending without the need for tax increases. President Bush won the

presidential election on an unambiguous "no new taxes" pledge.

It is important to discover how Americans feel on this issue one year after the president's election. Should the budget be balanced through spending growth restraint, or should taxes be raised?

A related issue deals with the contention by some politicians that the federal government actually should be running budget surpluses. Indeed, many politicians now contend that taxes should be raised to allow the government to run annual budget surpluses in order to retire the national debt. Another variant on this theme being promoted is that the excess Social Security taxes collected each year should be earmarked for debt retirement rather than returned to workers in a Social Security tax cut.

How does the public feel about these issues? Should taxes be raised to run persistent federal budget surpluses? Should excess Social Security taxes be earmarked for debt retirement, or should the tax be cut so that annual revenues do not exceed the amount required to pay current benefits?

**Congressional power.** Past polling results indicate that the public holds Congress in extremely low esteem. Yet, the reelection rate of incumbents is well over 90 percent. Conventional wisdom holds that one major explanation of this apparent paradox is that while voters intensely dislike Congress as an institution, they nevertheless love their own congressional representatives. If this is true, the American democratic process has become dysfunctional. In other words, individually rational voting decisions result in an outcome that Americans find collectively undesirable.

It is important, therefore, to discover whether Americans perceive and are concerned about this paradox of congressional elections. Do Americans believe Congress has too much power, and if so, how would voters like to see that power curtailed? Do they favor Constitutional amendments such as a balanced budget/tax limitation amendment, a presidential line-item veto amendment, or an amendment limiting the terms of senators and representatives?

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## "What would I like to see in opinion polls in 1990?"

By E. Kenneth Froslid

During a recent visit to the Roper Center, I tugged on file drawers and pulled out the somewhat dusty and faded records of polls dating back to the Great Depression. With the help of those files, any of us can read how people developed attitudes toward issues as diverse as US involvement in World War II and the union shop. Today, benefiting from hindsight, we can see how the public's dynamically changing perceptions shaped the politics that were to follow over the subsequent years.

Now, we are about to start a new decade. What perceptions do people have that will influence the way issues are resolved in the 1990s? As a business person, what do I want to know about public opinion at the start of this new decade?

I would like to know a lot about changing consumer preferences, investor motivations and other matters related to a specific business or industry. But my main concerns would lead me to "go global" — to look at how public opinion is likely to affect the political economy of our world and country. In this respect, I organize my concerns in three categories.

**Investment and ownership.** First of all, I would want to know what people in a variety of political and social settings think about private investment and ownership. Are opinions changing toward capital investment? Is it more or less welcome in certain places and under changing circumstances? How is profit regarded? Have attitudes about profit changed? Are private investment and ownership increasingly being viewed as means of raising standards of living?

Of particular interest will be the evolution and development of political and economic thinking in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Over the last four decades, most of us did not think of these areas as places where opinion could be identified, much less quantified. Now, business people and others, including the political leaders of those countries, cannot afford *not* to have a feel for what constitutes opinion. Even in countries where some form of Marxism will continue to prevail, the politicians will need knowledge of what people think, if they are to devise policies that will allow them to retain support. Public opinion polling, thus, promises to be a booming profession in East-

ern Europe and even in the Soviet Union.

**Spend now, pay later.** My second most important interest in public opinion polling in the 1990s focuses exclusively on the United States. As our country enters the new decade, we still seem to think we can tackle almost any problem, spend the money necessary to solve it, and postpone actually paying for it until future generations. A rising federal deficit and a shrinking pool of capital derived from savings indicates that our financial standing as a country is threatened by this "spend now, pay later" attitude and practice. At some point in the next half-decade, we will be forced to weigh the costs against the benefits for certain expenditure categories.

There will be a need to set priorities for such costly and useful programs as housing and universal health care. How will public opinion figure in this process of measuring risks and benefits? Will public opinion lead or will it follow the political leadership?

**Reform.** A third unknown about public opinion in the next decade relates to questions regarding ethical norms. Will substantial numbers of people be troubled by the prevailing ethical and moral standards in our society and demand higher ones? Will they, for example, become exercised about current political campaign financing practices—the unfair advantages that are given to incumbents—and corruption in general? Will public opinion influence business conduct, and make such institutions as churches and schools more responsive to the public good? How will our conceptions of right and wrong change?

It may be possible to achieve a safer, more peaceful world if leaders of all of our institutions — political and non-political — can be more responsive to public attitudes and opinions. The professionals who practice the art and science of public opinion polling have a great opportunity to help identify the important issues of the 1990s and to measure attitudes toward them.

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