

The People and the Press

Whose views shape the news?

By Thomas B. Edsall



The new Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey on polling and democracy clearly suggests that journalists, especially those who make use of polling data, face substantial and potentially dangerous credibility issues.

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Such issues center on the public perception that the press, in terms of beliefs, ideas, and political values, stands apart from the rest of the citizenry.

First, according to the survey, journalists and others in the field tend generally to be more confident of the accuracy of poll data than either policy leaders or the public at large. Second,

journalists are substantially more cynical about the motives of politicians than either the public or policy elites. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the media diverge from both the public and from the policymaking community in terms of partisanship and ideology. Only a tiny fraction of the media identifies itself as either Republican (4%), or conservative (6%). This is in



direct contrast to the public, which identifies itself as 28% Republican and 35% conservative, and to policy leaders, who describe themselves as 24% Republican and 18% conservative.

These areas of divergence between the public and the press lend themselves to conflict, both with the consumers and the makers of news, and threaten to diminish the legitimacy of American journalism.

Consider the first point: the willingness of the media to accept poll findings as accurate. By substantial margins, members of the media hold more favorable attitudes toward polling by such groups as Gallup, Harris, CBS/*New York Times* and *Newsweek* than either the general public or policy leaders. A majority, 52%, of media respondents thinks the best way public officials can learn the views of people on major issues is through polling.

These respondents are doubtful as to the effectiveness of such direct-contact approaches as town hall meetings (25% said they are the best way) or talking to people under a variety of circumstances (11%). The general public, in contrast, thinks town hall meetings (43%) and talking to people (28%) are better ways to gauge public opinion than polling (25%).

While there is no doubt that in terms of statistical measurement, polling is a far better tool than random conversations with people, or town hall meetings which draw self-selected or pre-selected audiences, survey research does not always capture the potential impact of public opinion. The intensity of feeling on any given issue is as critical as the numbers.

For example, opponents of gun control have, over the past two decades, been more deeply convinced of their position, and more prepared to cast votes on that single issue, than supporters of gun control. In spite of majority support in any given election, gun control may be a losing issue. Any politician, including one prepared to take a principled but disadvantageous position,

wants to know the likely costs. To discover these costs, home-district town meetings on the subject may be a better barometer of public opinion than a poll.

The same is true of such issues as abortion, gay rights and flag burning. Opinion surveys will quickly inform politicians in most sections of the United States that there is very little support for the view that the First Amendment confers the right to burn an American flag. Conversely, many conservative politicians now represent suburban communities where the majority of voters supports abortion rights. For the politician opposed to legislation to ban flag burning, and for the politician committed to civil rights for racial minorities—town meetings and conversations with constituents

are the only ways to learn how to articulate and defend a minority stand without losing the next election.

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While a poll might tell a politician to abandon a controversial stand, at times politicians can be rewarded for defending strongly held dissident minority views, and this is a

critical aspect of politics in a democracy—an aspect perhaps inadequately addressed by journalists focused on survey data.

The second point, that the media are more cynical than other Americans about the motivations of politicians, is also important. The general public has doubts regarding elected officials: 59% said campaign contributors exercise a great deal of influence over the decisions of elected and government officials, and 45% said lobbyists and special interest groups have similar leverage. These numbers pale, however, in comparison to the views of journalists and other media professionals, 70% of whom said campaign contributors have a great deal of influence, and 67% of whom said lobbyists and special interests exercise similarly strong influence.



While there is no question that campaign contributions, lobbyists and special interests profoundly bear on policy decisions, the emphasis that journalists place on these sources of influence arguably distorts news coverage, discounting, for example, the occasions on which a politician may take a stand based on principle.

More importantly, this focus by journalists, on campaign contributions especially, leads to political coverage that often lacks nuance and complexity. A whole industry has emerged in recent years in Washington—exemplified by Common Cause and the Center for Responsive Politics, among others—that specializes in providing the press with the data to make simple linkages between legislative voting records and campaign contributions. Such stories have become easy to research and find sources for—a reporter can do the work entirely from his or her computer and get good, often front-page, play.

The costs of the money/vote approach, and reportorial dependence, are not trivial: the press becomes the unwitting ally of a reform politics which, in fact, primarily represents a constituency of well-educated, upper-middle class whites who respond to the direct mail appeals of such a group as Common Cause, i.e., a special interest. This kind of political coverage serves to reinforce public cynicism, highlighting political motivations which stem from donor demands and shortchanging other, equally important forces working to shape political decision-making.

The tax revolt of the late 1970s and early 1980s was not, for example, driven primarily by large corporations seeking to shrink big government, but grew rather out of the combination of infla-

tion and bracket-creep that pushed many working and lower middle class households into a steeply progressive marginal rate structure that had once applied only to the upper middle classes and the rich.

Similarly, donors often make contributions to candidates and officeholders who already share their views. Examples abound of overly narrow journalistic interpretations of complex motivations for political action. As the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey makes clear, press cynicism is an important contributor to ideologically constricted—and thus frequently incomplete—news coverage.

The finding that there are very few conservative and/or Republican members of the media is equally significant. The institutional structure of reporting, the culture of journalism, the kind of mindset that most easily adapts to the demands of the profession, the educational requirements for admission to the field, and so forth, combine to recruit a distinctively liberal workforce. Simply put, the media do not have good antennae to detect conservative forces at work in the electorate.

The press, in the course of the past four decades, has been blindsided by some of the most significant political developments because so few members of the media share the views of the voters who have been mobilized by these movements. Examples include the white, working class reaction in the north to the civil rights movement, starting in the late 1960s; the emergence of Richard Nixon's "silent majority" in the 1970s; the conservative upheaval of 1980 that produced Ronald Reagan and the Republican takeover of the Senate; the rise of the Christian

Right; the Gingrich revolution of 1994; the popularity of welfare reform in the 1990s; and the unexpectedly conservative appointments and legislative priorities of the current Bush administration.

Whether or not members of the media agree with conservative voters on any given set of questions is not at issue. The problem is the invisibility of these men and women to the national media, and, most especially, the inability of the press to represent their views in public discourse. The failure to address the concerns of a substantial part of the American electorate has contributed markedly to the widespread perception of the media as elitist and arrogant.

Just as importantly, this blindness has prevented the media from staying abreast of developments and trends, resulting in the press playing catch-up, struggling in the aftermath, for example, to figure out what happened on Election Day 1994; who these evangelical voters are; why people would care so much about Aid to Families with Dependent Children when the costs of the program amount to less than 1% of the federal budget; and where the drive to impeach President Clinton came from.

The Kaiser/*Public Perspective* study provides useful data to the media about their own biases, loyalties, liabilities and taboos. Such data, used effectively, can direct press attention to the needs of the entire nation, encourage the press to exercise responsibly the protected position it holds at the heart of the American experiment, and restore a degree of public confidence in print, television and electronic journalism—an expanding universe in the ongoing information age. ●