

# Illusion of Change

*Sometimes it's not the same old question*

By George Bishop

Understanding how public opinion changes, its moods, cycles, and dynamics, has become one of the biggest challenges in public opinion research today. Numerous scholars have tried, by making extensive use of archival survey data, to explain the changes in terms of response to real-world events, mass media coverage of social and political issues, and cultural shifts in values.

Though these authors typically offer plausible accounts of changes in various indicators, none has explicitly considered a rival, and potentially much more parsimonious, explanation: simply, that the meaning and interpretation of the survey questions used to monitor public opinion over time have changed.

As nearly every public opinion analyst is aware, a cardinal assumption in asking any survey question is that it should mean the same thing to all respondents. Likewise, when a question is repeated over time, it should mean essentially the same thing the second time as it did the first. If these assumptions cannot be met, then valid comparisons across time and respondents become extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Most survey researchers recognize this problem in another guise when, for

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example, there has been a noticeable change in the wording (or context) of a question in a well-established time series, such that it becomes difficult to separate real change from the variation in wording or context. The problem of wording variations also arises quite frequently in comparing the conflicting results of polls on the exact same topic across different survey organizations.

The difference in wording invariably amounts to a difference in the meaning of the question, freighting such comparisons with invalidity, and analysts rightly regard such differences as troublesome in interpreting poll results.

Strangely, however, analysts and political scientists have been much less attentive, if not oblivious, to how the meaning of survey questions can vary across respondents and over time even when the wording and context of the question remain constant. These variations constitute one of the most serious threats to the validity of poll results in general, and in particular when interpreting changes in public opinion.

In culture, as in nature, the underlying dynamics of such a problem often become much more transparent under extreme conditions or unusual circumstances. The events of

September 11 represent exactly such an episode in American public life.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks, multiple indicators of public opinion and the mood of America changed dramatically. President Bush's approval ratings surged to an all-time high. Ratings of Congress also soared to record heights. Satisfaction with "the way things are going in the United States at this time" looked stronger than ever. Trust in government spiked to levels not seen since the mid to late

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1960s. And, perhaps to no one's great surprise, terrorism became "the most important problem facing this country today."

But what were the shifts in all these well-established indicators measuring? Were they what we would call true changes in American public opinion, temporary alterations in how respondents were interpreting the various questions in the context of 9/11, or some combination of the two?

Consider the most conspicuous example: presidential approval. Just before the events of September 11, George W. Bush's approval ratings in the Gallup time series had slipped to

a razor-thin majority of 51% (see Figure 1). Right after the terrorist attacks, his ratings skyrocketed to record levels, reaching a high of 90% in late September (21-22) and then holding in the low- to mid-80s for months thereafter.

Characteristically, political analysts and pundits viewed this as just one more example of the classic rally-round-the-flag effect. The country and its partisan Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike had all suddenly united behind the president in a time of crisis. But had public opinion of “the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president” really changed? The author would argue that all that had really changed was how respondents were interpreting the meaning of the standard Gallup question.

While this hypothesis may strike many as a highly plausible, but utterly obvious, observation, it has never been systematically examined. And while

we have no direct evidence of how respondents actually interpret questions about presidential approval, we do have a considerable chunk of indirect evidence from open-ended follow-up questions about why Americans approve or disapprove of the way the president is handling his job.

To its great credit, the Ohio Poll has routinely included in its surveys just such a follow-up probe on presidential approval for the past 20 years or so. Modeled in large part after the standard Gallup measure, the initial question asks respondents: “Generally speaking, do you approve or disapprove of the way [name] is handling his job as president?”

Next, respondents are probed on how strongly they approve or disapprove of the president’s performance or, if in doubt as to whether they approve or disapprove, which way they “lean.” They are then asked: “And could you tell me why it is you approve/disap-

prove of the way [name] is handling his job as president?”

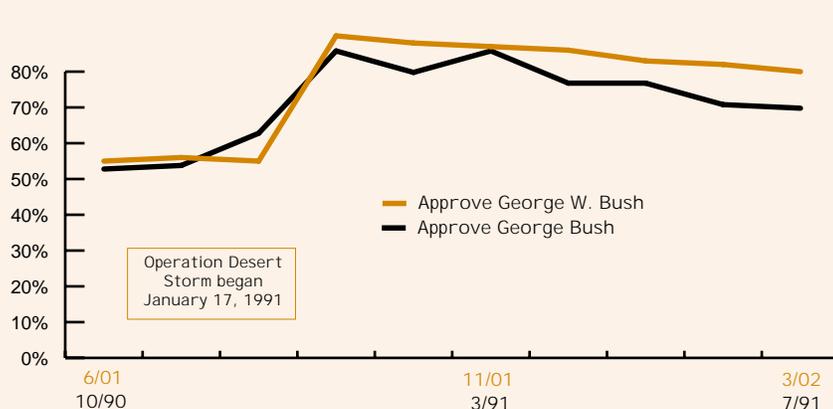
In November, President Bush’s approval ratings in the Ohio Poll reached a record high of 87%, very much as they did in the rest of the country. And, not surprisingly, when asked why they approved or disapproved of the way he was handling his presidential duties, well over half the respondents mentioned something about his dealings with the war on terrorism and foreign policy in general or his leadership and communication during the terrorism crisis.

The responses to this “why” question did not, of course, literally represent statements of causality. They were, rather, plausible justifications or rationalizations for the respondent’s approval or disapproval of the president, best thought of simply as cognitive by-products of how the question was being interpreted at the time it was asked.

Figure 1  
**Like Father, Like Son**

**Questions:**

Do you approve or disapprove of the way... is handling his job as president?



Approve George W. Bush

Date	Percentage
2001	
June 11-17	55%
July 19-22	56
August 24-26	55
September 21-22	90
October 19-21	88
November 26-27	87
December 14-16	86
2002	
January 11-14	83
February 8-10	82
March 8-9	80

Approve George Bush

Date	Percentage
1990	
October 18-21	53%
November 15-18	54
December 13-16	63
1991	
January 17-20	86
February 14-17	80
March 14-17	86
April 11-14	77
May 16-19	77
June 13-16	71
July 18-21	70

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of July 18-21, 1991, and by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, latest that of March 8-9, 2002.

In this particular instance, the content of the responses strongly suggests that for many respondents the question was being heard, psychologically, as: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president—*that is, in dealing with this terrorism/war situation we’re in right now?*”

Compare this psychological context with the one that existed when the approval questions were asked in the Ohio Poll the previous July. At that time a solid majority of Ohioans (60%) approved of the way George W. Bush was handling his job as president, 29% disapproved, and the rest (10%) said either “neither” or “don’t know.” When asked why, the responses scattered all over the lot, with, as would be expected, no mention whatsoever of terrorism, and just a small cluster of responses related to President Bush’s tax policies, which had been the subject of previous media coverage.

Just a few weeks earlier, a national Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll had reported the verbatim answers given by 877 respondents to a very similar

standard approval question must seem like a rather vague query to most respondents. What could the interviewer possibly mean by “the way he is *handling his job* as president”? For that matter, what is meant by “*approve*” or “*disapprove*”?

In other words, in more normal periods, when there’s not a lot of news about the president, this rather vague question becomes subject to multiple interpretations. For some respondents, it gets interpreted as a question about his economic, education, or foreign policies; for others it becomes a question about his personal character, morals, or religious values; for still others it’s just a question about whether they like him as a Republican; and ad infinitum.

By contrast, when a crisis emerges, as in the period following September 11, and the president becomes the focus of attention, the meaning of the question becomes much less ambiguous for most respondents. It comes to mean, largely, how is the president handling his duties in the present situation? The meaning of this normally ambiguous question becomes

cause respondents were answering essentially different questions. And if the meaning of the question cannot be held constant, all such comparisons become invalid.

A relatively sound comparison can, however, be made between the post-9/11 approval ratings and those of an earlier period: the time when George W. Bush’s father was president during the Persian Gulf War. In both cases, not only were the questions on presidential approval asked under roughly similar circumstances; they dealt with two politically and psychologically similar individuals with the same name.

In each of these instances it seems highly likely that respondents interpreted the question on presidential approval in much the same way. Not surprisingly, with the social contextual meaning of the question held relatively constant, we find that the approval ratings for George W. Bush resemble his father’s ratings during the height of the Gulf War rather closely (see Figure 1). The average for the elder Bush during the first quarter of 1991 was 82.7%, whereas for George

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“why” question. As in the Ohio Poll, these responses, especially in uncategorized, verbatim form, were spread all over creation.

Indeed, this is fairly typical during normal times, when there is not any specific focus to the news about the president and what he’s doing. Under such normal circumstances, the

homogenized, and the verbatim responses to the open-ended “why” probes cluster into fewer categories—for example, about terrorism, as was the case in the November Ohio Poll.

Responses to the presidential approval question in polls given after September 11 thus became incomparable with those given prior, be-

W. Bush it reached 86% for the period of October 20, 2001, to January 19, 2002. The difference of 3.3% in the two averages falls within the bounds of the recommended allowance for the sampling error of a difference between percentage points.

So with the meaning of the question remaining essentially the same for re-

spondents across the two periods, the approval ratings for the two presidents, father and son, are for all practical purposes identical, leading us to conclude that under the same social-psychological circumstances, no real change in

*York Times* just a couple of weeks after the attacks. “Suddenly, Americans trust Uncle Sam,” said his colleague, Alexander Stille, in early November, commenting on polls showing a sharp rise in the percentage of Americans

As with the surge in presidential approval, a much simpler and parsimonious explanation of the upward spike in trust lies at hand: namely a change in how respondents interpreted the standard question on

trust in government before and after 9/11. [For a similar observation, see Gary Langer’s article in the March/April 2002 issue of *Public Perspective*.]

Most likely, “trust in government” now meant trusting the present administration in Washington, symbolized by George W. Bush and his Cabinet, in particular, to do the right thing in dealing with the terrorists, the anthrax threats, and other aspects of the crisis.

Figure 2

## Illusion of Change in Trust

**Question:**

How much of the time do you think you can trust government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?



Source: Surveys by the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, latest that of 2000, and by Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*, using the NES trust measure, October 5-6, 2001.

presidential approval occurs. Only when the meaning of the question is altered by events does such an illusion of change appear. This represents but one conspicuous example of how interpreting shifts in public opinion as true change can be seriously misleading, if not entirely invalid.

Another dramatic example comes from recent polls telling us that, in the wake of 9/11, Americans have become much more trusting of the federal government (see Figure 2). “Now, government is the solution, not the problem,” wrote Robin Toner in the *New*

who said they now trusted the government in Washington to do what is right. Chiming in a few weeks later, R.W. Apple declared, “Big government is back in style.”

What happened? Had the American public undergone a change of heart about the leviathan in Washington that had been the object of increasing distrust for over 35 years? Were all the new books purporting to explain a 30-year trend of declining trust in government—like *Why Americans Don’t Trust Government* and *The Trouble with Government*—suddenly obsolete?

Just as they did for presidential approval, the events of 9/11 and their aftermath altered and homogenized the meaning of the standard question about trust in government for the great majority of respondents. The upward spike in the poll figures did not represent any fundamental change in the American public’s trust of the government in Washington, but merely an illusion of change generated by how respondents interpreted the question.

With the passage of time, such interpretations will probably become just as evanescent.