

Polls Portray a Considered and Stable Public Opinion

by Albert H. Cantril and Susan Davis Cantril

Differing assessments of the capabilities of the American public have animated debate about its appropriate role in our political process since the beginning of the republic.

Evidence of the general public's uneven knowledge and attention to issues is the usual take-off point when the issue comes up. But, since there has been no marked decline in public awareness in recent years, today's concern must have a different origin.¹

We suspect notice now given the matter arises largely because of difficulties our political institutions are having in playing their traditional role mediating between the public's concerns and governmental action.

We share Robert Dahl's sense that the scale and complexity of issues facing the country make it more difficult to find common ground in efforts to solve the nation's problems. This is reflected in a lack of comity between ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, diffused power of the political parties, and the proliferation of interest groups protecting ever narrower pockets of public policy.²

At the same time, our diversity as a nation becomes a more prominent feature of public discourse as windows keep opening for the "direct" expression of opinion: talk radio, electronic town meetings, and "grassroots" lobbying (often aided by new technologies and fed by special interest money). To Dahl all of this means more of what we don't need (fragmentation) and less of what we do need (integration).

We would add that the shifting institutional arrangements have changed the environment in which polls are conducted and consumed. More than ever, pollsters have become brokers between the public and the tangled trade-offs inherent in most policy issues.

This, in turn, has reinforced the "referendum paradigm" in polling. Incentives are for an up/down rendition of public opinion on the hot topic of the day rather than a fuller portrait of the public's thinking. News organizations that sponsor polls want the "bottom line" of whether the public is for or against an issue. Polls sponsored by private interests often want to show a solid public consensus behind some agenda.

All of this troubles many in polling who are uneasy with the simplified characterizations of public opinion that so often drive political debate. But, more generally, thoughtful people wonder whether poll percentages portray a public opinion that is considered and stable enough to play so prominent a role in our politics.

Pollsters and their Assumptions

Early polling was driven by the populist premise that an innate wisdom resided in the people and that the polls uniquely could express that opinion as a counterbalance to the moneyed special interests.³ Challenges to these assumptions were at first philosophical. But with time the pollsters were challenged to advocate less for their profession and use their tools to check out their assumptions.⁴

An early empirical challenge came in 1964 with publication of Philip Converse's analysis of data from the National Election Studies of the late 1950s. It called into question the pollsters' confidence that their polls were tapping "true" opinions and that there was coherence in public thinking.

In looking at responses given by respondents who were interviewed three times from 1956 to 1960, Converse was alarmed by four findings: some people gave different answers to the same question when interviewed at different times; what seemed minor changes in question wording had a major effect on responses;

people's views on issues did not hang together in substantively compatible patterns; and few people invoked abstract political concepts when describing their thinking about issues.

This led Converse to conclude that poll interviews were less a window on the "belief systems" of respondents than they were accounts of random answers people gave off the tops of their heads and that most people did not have "meaningful beliefs" on most issues.⁵ His analysis set off vigorous debate in academic circles which, in time, dealt with the issues he had raised.⁶

Meanwhile, political science, sociology, and psychology all had public opinion in their scope. But they came at it from differing perspectives. Political science and sociology tended to look at public opinion in the aggregate whereas psychology focused on the individual as the holder of an opinion. As a consequence political science and sociology often glossed over individual differences and psychology was less concerned with generalizing from findings at the individual level to the public as a whole. Neither approach was "right" or "wrong." Instead the two were focusing on different parts of the problem.

“*The process of responding to specific poll questions is creative—not haphazard. When people answer questions many elements are brought to bear at once: their basic values, experience, loyalties, personal style, and level of information.*”

Civic Participation...

In the last 30 years, the field of opinion research has come a long way, due in large part to what the different disciplines have brought to their common topic. Political scientists are more alert to factors explaining *individual* behavior, psychologists are more attentive to how their insights may be reflected in *collective* opinion, and “political psychology” has come into its own.

The Burden of the Evidence

There is much to draw on when looking at what has been learned *empirically* about the savvy the public brings to its responsibilities in our democracy.

Our best sense of where the burden of evidence now lies can be summarized in seven conclusions:

1. *While most people are only marginally attentive to political matters, they pay attention to those that are important to them.*

Different studies have used different criteria to judge whether the public is on top of current issues and knowledgeable about the basics of our system of government. Russell Neuman has reviewed extensive survey data on the matter. He identifies “three publics:” about 5% who are highly active and attentive to politics, 20% who are mostly passive and inattentive, and the remaining 75% who are minimally attentive.⁷

But while most Americans fall in the “minimally attentive” public identified by Neuman, they do track issues that are of particular concern to them.⁸ For example, people most supportive of choice in reproductive matters are also most likely to learn about court decisions on the issue.⁹

2. *The political beliefs of Americans are not organized on a left-right continuum.*

Many people may identify themselves as “liberals” or “conservatives” but it does not follow that they see the distinction as one between polar positions on issues. For one thing, self-

identified “liberals” and “conservatives” use fundamentally different concepts to describe their ideology rather than voice opposing views on common concepts.¹⁰ For another, identity with one ideological position or the other is as much a matter of liking or disliking an ideological label as the mix of one’s positions on issues.¹¹

It has also been shown that as many as five ideological dimensions may be needed to account for the public’s views on specific issues.¹² Thus, while views on specific issues can frequently be anticipated by knowing a person’s views on a more general issue,¹³ a left-right conception is inadequate in accounting for the way most people think about politics.

3. *Values cannot be left out of the picture.*

Values, as used here, are the explicit and implicit standards people use to gauge the desirability of both ends and means of action.¹⁴ The importance of values to opinion research is that people are usually quite clear about their values.¹⁵ Case studies have shown values to be key to understanding the “inner coherence” among the political opinions people have.¹⁶ Quantitative research has also shown that respondents’ views on specific issues are usually linked one way or another to some underlying value.¹⁷

Further evidence of the stability values contribute to opinion is that answers respondents give to questions about seemingly disparate issues tend to hold together if they evoke some common value.¹⁸ This is why careful analysis of poll data can pinpoint themes that underlie views on issues that may not at first appear related to one another.¹⁹

4. *Public opinion tends to be quite stable on most issues and, when it changes, tends to do so in sensible ways and for good reasons.*

Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro examined shifts in opinion over fifty years as measured by more than 1,000

questions that were repeated word-for-word at different times. Fewer than half (42%) of these soundings picked up a change from an earlier measure that was larger than might be explained by chance in the sampling process. When statistically significant changes did emerge, they were modest (almost half of them amounting to less than ten percentage points).

Three additional findings from their analysis of opinion change should be noted. First, changes almost always followed some event or could be accounted for by the effect of some social or economic trend on people’s lives. Second, when opinion changed, it usually did not swing back to its earlier position. Third, when opinion changed, it tended to do so in roughly the same degree for all subgroups in the population.²⁰

5. *Polls are able to pick up much of the social surroundings within which an individual expresses an opinion.*

Some contend it is gilding the numbers to characterize poll percentages as “public opinion” since they represent nothing more than a tally of replies from individuals living in completely separate worlds. The argument is that “mass opinion” is being measured, because there is no sense in which “the public” has participated as a collectivity in arriving at the opinion. Unlike public opinion, it is argued, mass opinion is not more than the sum of its parts.²¹

There is much evidence that this distinction between “public” and “mass” opinion is blurred in the real world.²² Respondents in polls are not atomized

“

Respondents take their cues on most issues from a variety of sources including public figures they esteem, everyday encounters, and more generally those who share similar goals, assumptions, and frustrations.

”

and totally insulated from the experience of others. They take their cues on most issues from a variety of sources including public figures they esteem, everyday encounters, and more generally those who share similar goals, assumptions, and frustrations. By definition these influences bring the individual's opinions into contact with others, the intersection where, in the words of Bill Kovach, "personal opinion must contest with public responsibility."²³

6. *Attitude consistency is in the eye of the opinion-holder.*

It is not uncommon when analyzing the results of a poll to find people expressing opinions that appear to be in conflict. The way questions have been worded may account for some of these apparent contradictions. But something else is usually occurring.²⁴

Most often the explanation is found by uncovering some additional dimension of opinion that underlies the two views that seem inconsistent. Consider the respondent who wants the US to be stronger militarily while at the same time advocating a reduction in defense spending. The tension between these views will disappear if one learns the respondent also thinks we can get more military bang for the buck.

A related process can be at work, but at a more basic level, when an issue brings two or more values into conflict. We found, for example, that many respondents who expressed moral concern about homosexuality also affirmed the privacy of such a relationship between consenting adults.²⁵

Among other factors that have been identified as accounting for an individual's seemingly inconsistent views are cultural norms, past experience, an individual's ability to tolerate inconsistency, and how much the respondent's sense of self is invested in an opinion.²⁶

7. *People differ in the ways they think about politics.*

We are aware today of the many different ways people take in information and how this can affect the way they view issues.²⁷ But much early research regarding public opinion and political behavior slighted this consideration by taking one of two tacks.

One approach used what Brewster Smith has called the "sociological proxy for individual level information."²⁸ It is seen in the analysis of voting research of the 1940s which concluded voters' preferences resulted from cross-pressures from conflicting loyalties (such as to social class, ethnic group, religion, or labor union).²⁹ This conclusion was based on the presumption that people with a given mix of social and demo-

graphic characteristics would have similar views. From the psychologist's vantage point, this assumption was open to serious question since opinions can derive from factors not captured by socio-demographic characteristics.

A second approach was to spell out a sequence of steps or pattern of reasoning people might take when making a choice between, say, two candidates. The study design would then be to see how well the sequence held up statistically among all respondents. But even if some such sequence was supported by the data, the psychologist would be uneasy because the study design had presumed that all people made decisions in the same way.³⁰

The lesson from these approaches is that use of a socio-demographic or one-size-fits-all conception of how opinions come together precluded the possibility of seeing whether there were differences among people. No amount of statistical manipulation of the data can compensate adequately for measures of individual differences that have not been included in the first place.³¹

“ *The picture that emerges out of this brief review is of a public whose attention to politics is uneven but whose opinions have coherence, tend to be stable, and reflect solid common sense.* ”

Case studies have proven to be a gold mine when it comes to understanding the relationship of individual opinions to facets of personality including such things as traits, predisposition, and temperament.³² The challenge has always been to extend these insights to the population as a whole. It is a daunting task to adapt measures that work at the individual level (which often involve

elaborate batteries of items) to questions suitable for a regular public opinion poll, especially when measures of other important variables compete for limited questionnaire space.

It has been shown, for example, that matters such as an individual's ability to tolerate ambiguity or willingness to buck conventional ideas explain as much or more about opinions on civil liberties issues as any demographic characteristics or even a person's values.³³ Effective measurement of such individual differences can be crucial in understanding why people hold the opinions they do.

Concluding Word

Where does this leave us regarding the capabilities of the public in our democratic system? The picture that emerges out of this brief review is of a public whose attention to politics is uneven but whose opinions have coherence, tend to be stable, and reflect solid common sense. It is a public able to size up the broad goals of public policy and, over time, determine whether the means adopted are in fact serving those goals.

True, opinions elicited by polls at times may be composed on the spot. But this does not mean they are not "considered." The process of responding to specific poll questions is cre-

Civic Participation...

ative—not haphazard. When people answer questions many elements are brought to bear at once: their basic values, experience, loyalties, personal style, and level of information.

For this public opinion to be given voice through the polls, it falls to the pollster to ask enough questions to capture the many dimensions of opinion. This is hard work. But, especially at a time when the polls seem to be playing a mediating role in our political process, to do less is to let the public down.

Endnotes:

¹ The January survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, *The Washington Post*, and Harvard University covered five areas of knowledge included in a 1989 survey by Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. The results were more similar than different. See, "Stability and Change in the US Public's Knowledge of Politics," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 55, 1991, pp. 583-612.

² Robert A. Dahl, *The New American Political (Dis)order* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, 1994) and "The Problem of Civic Competence," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 3, 1992, pp. 45-59.

³ George H. Gallup and Saul Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940).

⁴ E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1960).

⁵ Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems," in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1964), pp. 206-261.

⁶ See, Tom W. Smith, "Nonattitudes: A Review and Evaluation," in Charles F. Turner and Elizabeth Martin (eds.), *Surveying Subjective Phenomena*, Vol. 2 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), pp. 215-255; Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Chapter 2; and Donald R. Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity in American Public Opinion" in Ada W. Finifter (ed.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington: American Political Science Association, 1983), pp. 389-425.

⁷ W. Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 169-174.

⁸ Samuel Popkin argues that lack of general knowledge about politics does not preclude people from making "rational" decisions as voters. See, *The Reasoning Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁹ John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 18.

¹⁰ "Change," "equality," and "social issues"

are concepts used by self-described liberals, whereas conservatives think of such things as "fiscal policy" and "socialism vs. capitalism." See Pamela J. Conover and Stanley Feldman, "The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, 1981, pp. 617-645.

¹¹ Teresa E. Levitin and Warren E. Miller, "Ideological Interpretations of Presidential Elections," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 73, 1979, pp. 751-771.

¹² Norman R. Luttbeg, "The Structure of Beliefs Among Leaders and the Public," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 32, 1968, pp. 398-409.

¹³ Mark A. Peffley and Jon Hurwitz, "A Hierarchical Model of Attitude Constraint," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 29 (1985):871-890.

¹⁴ Clyde Kluckhohn, "Values and Value Orientation in the Theory of Action," in Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils (eds.), *Toward a General Theory of Action*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), p.395.

¹⁵ See, Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, "Public Opinion and Political Action," in Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (eds.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th edition (New York: Random House, 1985); Sniderman, et al., *Reasoning and Choice*; Zaller, *Nature and Origins*.

¹⁶ M. Brewster Smith, Jerome S. Bruner, and Robert W. White, *Opinions and Personality* (New York: Wiley, 1959).

¹⁷ Sniderman, et al., *Reasoning and Choice*.

¹⁸ Herbert McClosky and John Zaller found significant internal reliability when they constructed a 28-item scale of the values underlying capitalism and a 44-item scale of items for the values of democracy. See, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁹ See, Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962). For a sympathetic account of Lane's thinking along these lines, see Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity." An excellent example is the typology of political orientations developed in Norman J. Ornstein, Andrew Kohut, and Larry McCarthy, *The People, Press, and Politics: The Times Mirror Study of the American Electorate* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1988).

²⁰ Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Chapters 2, 7 and 8.

²¹ Herbert Blumer held that "public opinion is organic and not an aggregate of equally weighted opinions." See, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 13, 1948, p. 554. Gregory B. Markus cautions that "mass opinion" and "public opinion" are not interchangeable. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 58, 1994, pp. 635-636. Daniel Yankelovich holds a somewhat similar view suggesting that the public comes to "judgment" only after "working through" the full implications of an opinion. See, *Coming to Public Judgment* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press,

1991).

²² Others who elaborate this point include, Irving Crespi, *Public Opinion, Polls, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 7-12; and Page & Shapiro, *Rational Public*, Chapters 9 and 10.

²³ Remarks at a plenary session of the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, May 18, 1990.

²⁴ As Hadley Cantril put it: "Although public opinion is by no means consistent, many of the inconsistencies are more apparent than real when general frames of reference are discerned and when the basic standards of judgment are discovered from which specific opinions derive." *Gauging Public Opinion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 230.

²⁵ Albert H. Cantril and Susan Davis Cantril, *Live and Let Live: American Public Opinion about Privacy at Home and at Work* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union Foundation, 1994).

²⁶ See, Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston: Row, Peterson, 1957); Elliot Aronson, "Dissonance Theory: Progress and Problems" and Daniel Katz, "Consistency for What? The Functional Approach," in Robert Abelson, et al. (eds.), *Theories of Cognitive Consistency* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968); and Muzafer Sherif and Hadley Cantril, *The Psychology of Ego-Involvements* (New York: Wiley, 1947).

²⁷ What was demonstrated in research on perception has now been corroborated in the neurosciences. See, Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

²⁸ M. Brewster Smith, "Opinions, Personality and Political Behavior," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 52, 1958, pp. 1-26.

²⁹ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1944).

³⁰ For a helpful discussion, see Sniderman, et al., *Reasoning and Choice*.

³¹ For a discussion of this point, see Smith, "Nonattitudes," p. 247.

³² Smith, et al., *Opinions and Personality*; and Robert E. Lane, *Political Thinking and Consciousness: The Private Life of the Political Mind* (Chicago: Markham, 1969).

³³ See, Herbert McClosky and Alida Brill, *Dimensions of Tolerance: What Americans Believe about Civil Liberties* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983); Cantril and Cantril, *Live and Let Live*; and Sheldon S. Zalkind, Edward A. Gaugler, and Robert M. Schwartz, "Civil Liberties Attitudes and Personality Measures: Some Exploratory Research," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 31, 1975, pp. 31-54.



Albert H. Cantril and Susan Davis Cantril are independent consultants in survey and opinion research, Washington, DC