

Perspective

Opinion is Not Will

By Thomas T. Semon

The suburb of Woodside Glen lies 20 miles west of downtown. Week-day commuting by bus or car takes about one hour. The old railroad station used to serve a commuter train that went downtown in 35 minutes, but the trains stopped running in 1964, and the station is now a gift shop. There is a movement afoot to revive commuter rail service, and the leaders of the movement want to bolster their cause with evidence of popular support.

A public opinion poll among Woodside Glen residents shows a large majority in favor of restoring rail service. The poll result is widely publicized as “the will of the people” of Woodside Glen.

It is a common error. The poll result is not the will of the people; it is merely an opinion voiced in response to a question asked over the telephone. Talk is cheap, action is not. Opinion is talk, but “will” suggests readiness for action.

Some pollsters would like to think their reports reflect the will of the people. Some thirty years ago an executive of a major polling organization actually proposed doing away with elections and relying on polls instead. To be sure, elections do not do a good job of reflecting the will of the people, either, but at least voters have been exposed to claims and counterclaims; they have had the opportunity to absorb assorted punditry and the opinions of friends and neighbors, and to integrate and process all this information before voting. Finally, casting the vote involves some traditional formalities, a context that is not as casual and non-committal as a telephone interview.

The poll context can be very casual indeed. Picture Mrs. C, who is cleaning vegetables and watching C-Span on the kitchen TV when the call comes in. She switches to the speakerphone and starts the interview. Her son comes in from outside; she interrupts the interview to tell him to wipe his shoes and

make sure the dog stays outside, then asks the interviewer to repeat the last question. When her neighbor comes over an hour later, she tells her about the interview.

“So, what did you say about the train service?” “I said it was a good idea.” “Yeah, but since they built those stores across from the station there is no parking space left for commuters—either we’d have wall-to-wall curbside parking, or the town would have to build a new parking facility.” “That’s true, I didn’t think of that.”

The simple, direct question in the poll is likely to get a simplistic answer, similar to the “top-of-mind” response beloved by advertisers (they think that the first brand you mention is the one you’ll pick off the shelf). Fortunately or not, public policy is not like breakfast cereal, even though we tend to use the same selling techniques for both. Decisions about breakfast cereal are infinitely simpler.

If the interviewer had called Mrs. C back the next day, she would have gotten a better answer—still not a reliable expression of will, but a little closer to it.

In theory, we might mention the major pros and cons in an interview, so that the respondent could take them into consideration, but that creates practical problems. The interview becomes longer, more costly, and more of an imposition on the respondent’s time, increasing the risk of nonresponse and its potentially serious biasing influence.

Even if cost, nonresponse, and potential bias could be addressed, there is also the problem of how to formulate the list of pros and cons. The first impulse would be to specify it be as neutral and objectively worded as possible—but would that be realistic? In the real world, few people have the opportunity to evaluate truly balanced arguments and their supporting facts and assumptions. The messages they are exposed to are mostly unbalanced, partisan, biased; the facts they are told may be wrong and incomplete, or simply irrelevant to the issue. Eliciting a response based on an idealized information set is unlikely to yield a

realistic expression of either opinion or will; it would be at best an interesting academic exercise.

There are many ways to improve the quality of poll response, but none of them effectively addresses the issue of will. A majority opinion may not translate into majority will. The majority may be complacently confident in the rightness of its view, and feel no urgency to act; the minority, conscious of its uphill challenge, may be committed and activist, and may prevail. Recent national polls favoring gun control, contrasted with the failure to enact any such legislation, come to mind as another example of public opinion not backed by will.

Meanwhile, voters back at Woodside Glen are electing a new mayor this year, and one candidate sees the poll favoring restored rail service as a promising campaign issue to promote. His opponent rebuffs this misunderstanding of popular will by bringing up the parking problem, the cost of the project, and a transportation study suggesting few residents would actually use the railroad for commuting. The electorate views the opponent as a practical fellow, he wins the election.

We can speculate how those respondents to the original poll would react to the election result. Will they be deeply disappointed? Some probably will, but many are likely to shrug it off, on the grounds that, well, it was a nice idea, but it probably wouldn’t have worked anyway.

To think, or even claim, that poll results reflect will is superficially reasonable; but superficial rationality is not a good support for decision or action, and it is foolish to think it is.

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