

Servants of the People

Political leadership and the public voice

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There are reasons John McCain's town hall approach to politics sparked interest and enthusiasm in the presidential primaries over a year ago. For a public weary of the poll-driven policies of the Clinton administration, the McCain style of direct interaction with the voters, cam-

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paigning against special interests under the rubric of campaign finance reform, and "straight talk" seemed to catch fire all by itself.

Those reasons are spelled out quite vividly in the new Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey on polling and democracy. Americans still do not feel they



are being heard in Washington and want more direct interaction with government officials. And although the public is distrustful of government and politics, the news media are carrying forward that cynicism to a greater degree than ever previously suspected.

Overall, the poll quantifies a number of seemingly conflicting, yet consistently “American,” themes in the public’s views of the proper use of polling and the role of polls in conveying Americans’ input inside the beltway. These themes include a distrust of special interests, a desire to be heard, and the meaning of democratic leadership; and implicit in them are a number of key lessons for policymakers and politicians in how they should incorporate the will of the people into their decision-making process.

Policymakers need to be aware that Americans feel a sharp disconnection between how much influence they believe they actually have on government officials and how much they think they should have.

Sixty-eight percent of Americans think they should have a great deal of influence on the decisions of elected and government officials in Washington, but fewer than one in ten (9%) believe they do.

A far smaller degree of disconnection exists among policy leaders. One-third said the views of the majority of Americans have a great deal of influence inside the beltway, only nine points lower than the level of influence they said the public should have.

Who instead do Americans think bends the ears of the politicians and officials in the Capitol? According to the public, money talks. Nearly six in ten

(59%) said that politicians pay a great deal of attention to their campaign contributors when making decisions about important issues—more than any of the eight other groups or factors tested, including policymakers’ own knowledge on the issue (35%), their conscience or judgment (24%), and outside experts (28%). In fact, campaign contributors were second only to lobbyists and special interests in the

on decisions in Washington. This contrasts with the 59% of the public and 43% of policy leaders who said campaign contributors have a great deal of influence, and the 45% of both samples who said lobbyists and special interest groups have that level of influence.

The survey adequately demonstrates a wide gap between the press and

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public’s perception as the greatest influence on officials’ decisions about important issues (45%).

Americans rank their own ability to influence their elected and government officials dead last. Only 14% think that members of the public who contact officials about an issue have a great deal of influence, while a mere 18% think officials would listen to public opinion polls.

The media are even more cynical about the influence of special interests on policymakers. A stunning 70% of the press rated campaign contributors, and 67% rated lobbyists and special interest groups, as having the most influence

everyone else on this issue. Sixty-eight percent of policy leaders and 65% of the public said that when officials make a decision that isn’t supported by a majority of Americans, it is often because they choose to follow what special interests want instead. However, an amazing 84% of the news media pointed to the influence of special interests—19 points more than the public.

What does this mean? First and most clearly, the news media need to gain some perspective when they are so far out of step with the views of policy leaders and the public. Second, Americans are not willing to chalk up policy mistakes to even benign neglect on the part of public



officials, but instead are more likely to view these decisions as an out-and-out thwarting of their will.

Americans' belief that special interests have a disproportionate influence on government officials is closely linked to a strong yearning for their own voices to be heard, and their opinions understood, above the din of clamoring lobbyists. While "I feel your pain" became a trite joke for late-night television comedians, it was first grounded in one of the foremost measurements of a candidate's voter strength: the belief that the candidate "understands the concerns of people like me."

Currently, many Americans are rating their public officials fairly low on this barometer of understanding, and rightly so, according to the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey. Less than half (49%) of the public believes that elected and government officials in Washington understand what the public thinks about the issues facing the nation.

That message hasn't gotten through the beltway, however. Washington arrogance is overflowing when fully 85% of policy leaders and 90% of journalists say they feel they understand what the public thinks.

So, if officials aren't in tune with the voices of the people, how does the public want them to learn what the majority thinks about important issues? Any way they can, according to the survey.

Over three-quarters of the public said that good ways for elected and government officials to learn what people think include holding town hall meetings (88% said it's a good way to learn),

conducting public opinion polls (84%), talking to people who call, write or email an official's office (82%), and talking to people at shopping malls and on the street (75%).

However, while the public placed the most faith in the Norman Rockwell setting of a town hall meeting, with 43% saying it's the best way for officials to learn what people think about important issues, 46% of policy leaders and 52% among the media chose public opinion polls as the preferred means of communication.

The upshot is that policymakers faced with the time constraints imposed by their jobs must balance the appeal of direct interaction with the voters with what Americans say is an equally valid means of understanding their thoughts: polling.

In fact, voters embrace their ability to have a say via the medium of opinion polls. They are quite judicious in thinking that officials in Washington should pay more attention to polls on subjects about which they consider most Americans to be adroit, particularly health care and education. Conversely, they want government officials to rely less on popular sentiment on issues where they have less confidence in the public's knowledge, such as foreign policy issues.

The amount of influence the will of the people has on the decisions of policymakers creates a fundamental tension in any government. In the early '90s, when American political consultants were first working in Eastern Europe, a group of political consultants provided counsel to the Hungarians, who were experiencing their first-ever democratic elections for Parliament.

Two years later, the same consultants went back to explore how the Hungarians were faring in their experiment with democracy. The most pointed question Hungarian policymakers posed was whether they were supposed to vote for what they thought was right, or for what the majority of their constituents wanted.


The question was, of course, greeted with self-deprecating laughter from the consultants, who pointed the Hungarians to the Federalist Papers and indicated that this dilemma was still a stumbling block for American elected officials.

In fact, this question is one of the most divisive issues in the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey. What is really telling is simply how much the public wants its views taken into account in the decision-making process.

Given two choices on this issue, 54% of Americans expect their officials to follow what the majority wants, even if it goes against the officials' knowledge and judgment. Fewer (42%) want officials to use their own judgment if it goes against the wishes of the majority.

Even when given the caveat that past majority positions have later been judged to be wrong (e.g., racial segregation), only a bare majority (51%) expressed a desire to have officials rely on their knowledge when they think the majority is wrong, while 40% continued to prefer they do what the majority wants "because the majority is usually right."

Some major implications emerge for policymakers from the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey as they navigate the shoals of public opinion.



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The Bush administration and countless other politicians remain caught in the wake of the Clinton scandal wave, a particularly treacherous situation whenever suggestions of improper influence arise. Policymakers need to be aware that the media, as well as opposing campaigns, are going to keep trying to tie votes and policy decisions to campaign contributions. Therefore, an issue like the environment, which is not a top priority for voters at all, could be used as the basis for a negative campaign message because the potency of the message lies not in the issue itself, but in attaching it to campaign contributions or special interest money.

Related to this, media cynicism about campaign contributions and special interests is so far out in left field compared to the views of the public and policy leaders that it is clear a thorough internal examination of these problems is long overdue.

While many people who go to Washington today aren't exactly the

Capraesque icon of Mr. Smith, they certainly consider themselves to be well-intentioned individuals. The survey clearly demonstrates the high level at which Americans want their opinions considered in the decisions made by these policymakers. In addition, it stresses the extent to which the American people think policymakers “just don't get it,” despite whatever good intentions they might have. A majority (51%) thinks policymakers don't understand what the public wants when they make decisions contrary to the majority sentiment. Therefore, it is doubly important for policymakers not to succumb to the chatter inside the “echo chamber” of the beltway and lose perspective on the opinions of average Americans.

Despite the bashing that public opinion polls took in the 2000 presidential campaign, it is clear that Americans still value polls as a means of having their voices heard, curbing the influence of special interests, and injecting a democratic style of leadership in which the voices of

many are considered in the formulation of public policy.

If we all lived in small New England states, then perhaps town hall meetings would be a realistic means of injecting public opinion into the national debate. However, when it takes one western senator a whole year to travel to every single county in his or her home state, it is clear that the limits imposed by geography and time necessitate a continuing place for polling in public policy.

Moreover, that's just fine with most Americans. Consider the following:

- 84% or more of general public respondents to the *Kaiser/Public Perspective* survey said officials in Washington should pay a great deal or a fair amount of attention to what opinion polls say on various domestic issues.
- 84% agreed that polling is one of the best means we have for communicating what the public is thinking.
- 84% said a poll is a good way for government officials to learn what the majority of people in our country thinks about issues.
- 81% said that when people are interviewed for an opinion poll they usually answer honestly.
- 78% said that polls on social and political issues serve a useful purpose.
- 86% of policy leaders and 94% of the media said that polls are useful in understanding how the public feels about issues.

These attitudes—combined with the proclivity of the press to report opinion polls—mean that polling is, should be, and will continue to be a major player in framing the public debate. ●