

Debunking the Pandering Politician Myth

By Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro

High on the list of problems often touted as afflicting contemporary American politics is the charge that policymakers “pander” to public opinion by formulating significant policies to mirror poll results. The presumption is that politicians slavishly follow public opinion; the cost has been an abdication of leadership and of the will to use personal judgement to promote the national interest. President Clinton’s first term is often cited as prime evidence of pandering—and Dick Morris’ recent book on his stint as the President’s pollster has only inflamed the charges. As Maureen Dowd recently wrote in the *New York Times*, Clinton’s mind meld with Morris “demonstrates that polling has turned leaders into followers.”

However, despite the nearly universal acceptance of the notion that today’s politicians pander, no systematic evidence supports it. We drew this conclusion after interviewing more than 100 staff members in both the executive and legislative branches during Bill Clinton’s first term, and by examining evidence from public opinion polls and government decisions on significant policy issues since the mid-1930s.

“

Administration officials repeatedly told us that the primary purpose of tracking public opinion was not to ‘pander’ but to educate, lead, or otherwise influence public attitudes.

”

Behind Closed Doors

Our research team interviewed 114 people who advised or worked in the executive and legislative branches from 1993 to 1996. We interviewed 23 individuals associated with the Clinton administration and 91 senior congressional staff members. The interviews were based on a questionnaire and were confidential to encourage candor. In fact, many of the interviews included frank discussions of personal and professional matters that were far more politically damaging than the subject of public opinion.

Interviews with individuals tied to the Clinton administration suggested that public opinion did not generally drive the formulation of specific social policies. We focused particular attention on the President’s health reform effort and were consistently told that public opinion did not decisively influence the formulation of policy. For instance, both interviews and examination of confidential White House records indicated that Stanley Greenberg, the President’s primary pollster in 1993 and 1994, was locked out of the process of formulating health care policy.

Instead, the President’s personal convictions and those of his senior advisers, we were told, were behind important health policy decisions. As Stan Greenberg said, “Our problem is not being political enough. The general impression that the President is too political is in fact just dead wrong. The opposite’s the case. His tendency is to develop policy removed from politics.”

We also interviewed a random sample of senior congressional staff that reflected the partisan balance in Congress and the larger size of the House of Representatives.¹ The interviews suggested that members of Congress are clearly not addicted to polls. We consistently heard that members conducted few polls, and those that were

conducted were largely limited to district or state election campaigns. Instead of surveys, individual members relied on traditional contacts with their constituents—face-to-face meetings, mail, and phone calls. When asked to identify methods of monitoring public opinion, only 21 of 91 staffers (23%) reported conducting private polls, 87% relied on letters or phone calls, and 51 interviewees (56%) pointed to personal encounters. Fifty-six percent (44 of 79) reported that their offices commissioned no surveys and, not surprisingly, nearly three-quarters of staffers (59 of 80) indicated that no one in their office had special responsibility for analyzing them.

One reason members do not rely on opinion polls is that they do not trust them. A Republican staffer expressed a pervasive judgment: “We discount any polling [because the results] depend on how questions are asked and who is asked. Who designs [a poll] can make it say what they want. We trust direct contact with constituents instead.”

Furthermore, congressional members apparently consider public opinion an inappropriate consideration in formulating policy. When we pushed interviewees on the usefulness of public opinion information in policy making, a common response was that public opinion was not directly considered. For instance, when staffers were asked whether existing opinion today or anticipated future opinion influenced decisions, three quarters (18 of 24) spontaneously challenged the premise of the question and volunteered that public opinion was of no use. When we asked a question on how public opinion weighed in the member’s decisions about specific policies like health care or welfare reform, again, a quarter (12 of 44) challenged the question’s implicit assumption and insisted that their member’s decisions were not guided by public opinion.

The clear message was that the policy positions of members were guided by their personal beliefs, ideology, and judgments. Staffers regularly empha-

Public Opinion Polling...

sized their members' determination to "do what's best" according to their personal values. As one Republican explained, "On policy, beliefs are more important than public opinion." Another explained that the member "just does what he feels he needs to do. Public opinion is not at all useful in day-to-day policy making." Nine out of 10 acknowledged that public opinion information was used to lobby their offices but argued that it had no influence on the member. Rather, their member "stuck" to his or her beliefs and distrusted the poll results because the "numbers are so easy to manipulate" to serve the interests of the lobbyist—whether it was an interest group, another member, or the White House.

Independent Evidence Also Questions the Pandering Myth

The danger in relying on interviews is that respondents may simply offer the expected answers to politically loaded questions about "pandering." Several bodies of research, however, corroborate the central tendency of interviewees to discount the impact of public opinion on policy decisions.

Our interviews with individual congressional offices are consistent with a large body of quantitative research on the relationship between individual members of Congress and constituency preferences in the members' districts. These studies indicate that public opinion has a measurable but modest and highly contingent impact on members' voting decisions and electoral prospects. Part of the explanation for the muted impact of constituents is that their policy preferences have only a small influence on congressional elections. Instead, voters give substantial weight to candidates' personal characteristics and party in their voting decisions, and know little about (and often do not act on) members' policy positions or records. Evidence, then, that constituency opinion is not a decisive influence on individual members substantiates the downplaying of public opinion by congressional staff.

Another body of research compares overall government policy with aggregate public opinion over time. Alan Monroe of Illinois State University has studied the consistency between government policies that had prior majority support and policy changes between 1960 and 1991. He asks: Does the government adopt policies supported by majorities in polls? These data indicate that opinion/policy agreement declined overall from 63% between 1960-80 to 55% between 1981-91. Such agreement slipped in the area of social welfare policy from 63% to 51%. While this is a crude test, it is consistent with a decline in responsiveness to public opinion rather than an increase as the pandering myth supposes.

Monroe's findings are confirmed by an alternative research method that compared cases of opinion change with changes in policy.² This approach asks: Were changes in public opinion (as recorded in identically-worded polling items) followed by changes in policy? This research found that opinion/policy congruence declined from 67% during 1935-45

(heavily dominated by wartime issues) to 54% during the 1960s, and then increased to 75% during the 1970s.

Using this approach, we conducted preliminary research that focused on four social policies: welfare, crime, social security, and health care. We compared a substantial amount of public opinion data from 1984 to 1994 with available indicators of government policies from 1985 to 1995, dividing our analysis into three time periods that corresponded with the three most recent presidential administrations.

Our preliminary results, which we will be examining further in future research, reveal that policy became increasingly incongruent with changes in public opinion. Of the 18 cases of opinion change in the 1984-87 period, 12 cases were congruent (67%). In particular, government spending increased in policy areas that enjoyed growing public support. During the Bush administration, congruence dropped to 40% (14 of 35). The drop in responsiveness reflects the lack of policy change in health care and crime, as well as the lack of clear policy measures for some issues (exclusion of the latter cases produces a 43% congruence rate).

“***The charge of pandering politicians is dangerous because it leads to the erroneous conclusion that the public is to blame for the ills that afflict America's politics.***”

Congruence remained a low 37% (14 of 38 cases) during the Clinton 1992-94 period. What is particularly striking is that the Clinton period's responsiveness could be interpreted as considerably lower: six of our 14 cases of congruence involved health care reform where declining public support for the Clinton reform plan coincided with Congress' subsequent defeat of the plan. In other words, the public's prior expectations and support for acceptable health reform was thwarted. Oppositional elites may have simply responded to public opinion that they helped create; the health reform case may strain the notion of democratic responsiveness to autonomous public preferences. If we put aside the Clinton health reform plan and its components, opinion/policy congruence drops to 26% (8 of 31 cases). This low responsiveness also reflects seven "mixed" cases in which increases in welfare caseloads occurred with declines in benefit levels, making opinion/policy congruence judgments ambiguous.

The evidence overall points to a persistent pattern since 1980: a generally low and at times declining level of responsiveness to public opinion especially during the first two years of the Clinton presidency.

Although policy responsiveness has declined, electoral competition continues to create selective periods when office-

holders become particularly attuned to public opinion. Just weeks before the 1996 elections a flurry of legislation was signed into law that was clearly supported by the public: an increase in the minimum wage, environmental protection, the provisions of Kennedy-Kassebaum health care reform, and, most important, welfare reform.

In short, systematic comparisons of government policy with polls provide no evidence that policy makers during the first term of the Clinton presidency were persistently preoccupied with pandering. If anything, the evidence suggests that government responsiveness to public opinion has been on the downswing.

Educating, Leading, or Manipulating Public Opinion

We face a puzzle: if public opinion does not normally appear to affect policy decisions, why do government leaders stock a veritable warehouse of information on public opinion? According to interviews and other evidence, the explanation for the apparent disregard of public opinion amidst studious monitoring is that the Clinton administration and congressional leaders used such information to craft their political rhetoric. Polls and focus groups are used to identify the language and arguments to present already-decided policies in the most appealing manner.

Administration officials repeatedly told us that the primary purpose of tracking public opinion was not to "pander" but to educate, lead, or otherwise influence public attitudes toward the President and his policies. It is telling that Greenberg's services on behalf of the administration's health reform initiative were most heavily used after the policy was largely set and it was time to sell the plan.

Our congressional interviews produced a persistent theme: polls were, as one staffer put it, "useful in terms of

framing what you were going to do anyway." Six out of ten congressional staff indicated that public opinion information had been used to frame already-decided policy decisions. Twice as many of those we interviewed indicated that public opinion information was more useful for leading or educating Americans (47%) than for responding to them (25%). Of 88 staffers, 15 argued that both were important and 10 indicated other uses of public opinion.

Contrary to the notion that pandering politicians obsequiously follow public opinion, congressional officials repeatedly emphasized that polls and focus groups were a "tool to shape our message," "educate the citizens," and to "learn what messages we need to get across." As one Republican staffer commented, opinion information is "not the source of decisions on policy but rather is helpful in showing the kinds of things [a member] is not communicating... and therefore the need to try to educate further."

The Myth of Pandering

The notion that today's politician panders to polls when making significant policy is a myth built on scattered anecdotes and ungrounded presumptions. This myth neither enjoys empirical support nor conforms with the current incentive structure in American politics. The comparisons of polls with government policy over time indicate that policy makers' responsiveness to public opinion has not increased; if anything, it has declined since 1980.

The drop in responsiveness since 1980 is consistent with a trend toward political polarization. For much of the past 15 years, neither political party has controlled both the White House and Congress. The divisions created by split party control have been intensified by increased ideological divergence especially in Congress; the Democratic Party's loss of its southern conservative base to Republicans has made each po-

litical party more homogenous. The result is that political leaders are encouraged to rely on directing public opinion to counteract the political leverage of their opponents and to build support for their own ideological or policy goals.

The charge of pandering politicians is dangerous because it leads to the erroneous conclusion that the public is to blame for the ills that afflict America's politics. More leeway, it may be implied, ought to be given to the few who have superior training and knowledge. The evidence suggests, however, that the current state of American politics cannot be blamed on excessive responsiveness to public opinion and insufficient leeway for elites. Political leaders already exercise significant discretion. If anything, they should pay more attention to public concerns and preferences.

Endnotes:

¹ The number of interviews reported herein is at times much less than 91 because time constraints prevented some staff from finishing the interview.

² This method has been used by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro.

This research was supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, Russell Sage Foundation and an "Investigator Award" from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This continuing research is being conducted at the University of Minnesota, and at the Barnard-Columbia Center for Urban Policy and Paul F. Lazarsfeld Center for the Social Sciences at Columbia University. We gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of John Bies, Eric Lawrence, Michael Zis, and Eric Ostermeier. The analyses are solely the authors'.



Lawrence R. Jacobs is associate professor, department of political science, University of Minnesota and Robert Y. Shapiro is professor, department of political science, Columbia University