

NOPINION AND LINKAGE: THE RELATIONSHIP OF SURVEY NON-ATTITUDES TO PUBLIC OPINION'S EFFECT ON GOVERNMENT POLICY

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I. NOPINION.

NOpinion is expressed opinion which is as worthless as the answer the respondent should have given: "Gee, I've never thought about that." or "Gosh, I'm afraid I don't have the foggiest idea." Converse labelled these "non-attitudes." The dominant discussion theme of non-attitudes has been unreliability: inconsistency, volatility, context dependency, randomness, irrationality. The discussion theme of NOpinion is, instead, invalidity.

Examples of NOpinion.

In a 1978 Gallup poll on the importance of a balanced budget 96% of subjects offered an opinion. Yet 25% didn't know if the budget was balanced, and 8% thought it was balanced.

Smith (In Turner & Martin, 1986) describes a test in which the mid-point of a scale was labelled "Not sure. It depends." In follow-up questions to those who selected this scale point, Smith found that only 34% were truly ambivalent. 5% of responses were actually "Don't knows," and that 60% were non-attitudes/NOpinion.

If 60% of mid-point answers are NOpinion, what of the adjacent scale points in which the mildest, least committed, responses appear? Or, if social desirability creates pressure on the uninformed to answer in the extreme, do not all scale points hide NOpinion?

II. LINKAGE.

Unqualified public opinion is a problem only if users of opinion data make incorrect decisions as a result. Is public opinion linked to public policy decision-making, other than during elections? Key (1961) stated, "We have practically no systematic information about what goes on in the minds of public men as they ruminate about the weight to be given to public opinion in governmental decision."

At a macro level, evidence of linkage exists. Page & Shapiro (1983) related changes in public opinion for 609 questions asked at two or more points in time between 1935 and 1979

to changes in national policy decisions. Congruence between policy change and public opinion change occurred in 43% of cases, rising to 62% with opinion change of 10-14 points, and to 86% with opinion change of 20-29 points.

Models of Linkage.

We seek the closest to the "pure" PR model, which sees public opinion studied by policy-makers who form policy according to that opinion. "We have to decide on this issue. What does the public think? The public thinks X. Therefore, we'll do X."

Public -----> Policy
Opinion Decision

In that the "pure" model is elusive, as we will see, we will touch on three other models, shared values, delegate role-playing, and the pressure group model, as well as a modification of the "pure" model.

Polls and The White House.

Without question, the White House has been the locus of the most widespread polling known to politics (Crespi, 1989). Evidence of the awareness of poll results, but not evidence of their use for policy decisions, arose in a forum of eight former White House Chiefs of Staff (Kernell & Popkin, 1986). Three Chiefs commented on polls:

-polls did not affect one's performance of daily duties.

-nothing could be done about world matters over which they had no control; (e.g., hostages in Iran, OPEC price increases).

-there was discussion of tinkering with the President's public appearances. Poll-based changes in policy did not arise in the forum discussion.

Here are three examples of White House use of polls.

1. At the beginning of his Presidency, the public was afraid Reagan would phase out Social Security. The Democrats attacked, and

Reagan reversed his stance, promising to preserve and protect Social Security. The polls were an early warning to Reagan. (Crespi, 1989).

2. The White House opposed a second Reagan-Gorbachev summit shortly after the first, but the "Washington community" advocated a second. Hinkley (1991) says, "Poll data revealed the general public was not too concerned about another summit and would probably blame the Soviets if one were not held. This information helped policymakers resist pressure to act quickly." Note the circumstantial character of this evidence.

3. In her book about the Reagan White House, speech-writer Peggy Noonan reports on a meeting between Reagan and a group of conservatives. The conservatives felt Reagan had missed an opportunity, after seeming public support following Ollie North's testimony, to get contra aid. Noonan quotes Reagan as saying that "Dick Wirthlin's polls...showed that we didn't have the popular support even after Ollie."

No one questions the policymaker's common sense in testing the public waters about an advocated position. The traditional theory of public opinion as strategic input to decisions--the "pure" model--seems, though, to take a back seat to the use of public opinion as a tactic in a political fight. This is not linkage as usually defined.

The Congress.

Published evidence is in short supply; here are two bits:

In May, 1981, Health and Human Services Secretary Richard S. Schweiker announced plans to reduce benefits for retirees and to make stricter the requirements for disability insurance. An ABC-Post poll showed the public strongly against the plan. The Senate passed a resolution condemning the proposals by 96-0 (Sussman, 1988), a vote which would probably have occurred without the poll.

In July, 1987, during the Iran-Contra hearings, Senator Warren Rudman advised Lt. Col. Oliver North that public opinion polls showed the public was against Contra support, 75-25 (Converse, 1987). Rudman's comment, of course, was policy-related, even if it did not refer to policy in the making.

The Shared Values Model in The House: The Miller-Stokes Study (1963).

Evidence in this study provides moderate support for the shared values model, in which legislators and their constituents think alike. Correlation between constituent opinion and Congressmen's opinion was .50 for civil rights, .26 for social welfare and .32 for foreign policy. The riveting correlation in Miller & Stokes, though, relates to the role-playing model, in which the legislator acts as a delegate of the constituent. The correlation between real constituent opinion vs. Congressman-perceived constituent opinion was .74 for civil rights, but only .17 for social welfare and .25 for foreign policy. As Luttbeg (1968) said, "Delegates who don't know what their constituents want can't claim to represent their views." 30 years later, with more polls available, Miller & Stokes deserves replication to see if linkage in the Congress has improved .

State Government.

Perhaps state legislators are more accurate role-players than are Congressmen. Crane (1960, in Luttbeg, 1968) found that 85% of the representatives in the Wisconsin Legislature voted as did their constituents in a subsequent primary.

Luttbeg (1968) describes a 1967 study in which 60% to 90% of members of the Iowa Legislature predicted their own districts' votes on four amendments to the state constitution.

Local Government.

Prewitt & Eulau (1969, in Dreyer & Rosenbaum, 1970) found that 44% of councilmen in 82 local governments around San Francisco had "self-defined images of community needs" (shared values). 32% said they responded to "ad hoc pressures and petitions" (delegate role-playing).

In the past state and local governments may have been more closely linked to public opinion than national government.

Back to the Congress: The Pressure Group Model.

I have scrutinized Richard Fenno's 1966 extensive description of decision-making in the House Appropriations Committee for kernels of a public opinion presence. His overview is, "...bureau success in obtaining its requests (to the Appropriations Committee) depends primarily on factors internal to the bureau, to the Committee and to the bureau-Committee relationship."

In his conclusion, Fenno comes down on the side of the pressure group linkage model. "The elements of (a Congressional committee's) environment are the parent chamber, the other chamber, the executive branch, and clientele or constituency groups." No mention of public opinion.

The Linkage Models Revisited: Which Ones Apply?

Salvaging the Shared Values Model.

Key (1961) suggested this retreat for the shared values model: "...the viability of a democracy may depend less on popular opinion than on the activities and values of an 'aristocratic' strain whose members are set off from the mass by their political influence, their attention to public affairs, and their active role as society's policy-makers." The elites, of course.

Rosenberg et al (1970) stated that the White House and the Congress pay closer attention to and respond more to "attentive publics" than to the general public, in that these "publics" are more likely to vote their beliefs. The classic case is that of gun control.

Of note is Rosenberg's use of the plural "publics" instead of the singular "public." In its singular form, "attentive public" refers to an educated elite. As "publics" the referent shifts to the special interests. The difference is the politician's receptivity to communication from a wise person vs. from a partisan, of counsel vs. advocacy. Shared values have become pressure.

So, the shared values and delegate role-player models apply, at least below the national level, and pressure groups seem omnipresent, particularly at the national level. The "pure" public opinion model may represent the innocence of early theorizing.

The Pure Public Opinion Model: Still a Phantom.

Even with the extensive White House use of polls, "the smoking gun." is not apparent. We still seek the observer who can say, "We decided on this policy because it was clear from the polls that the public wanted us to do so."

Reality may be this: "We want to do X. The public will buy it/won't buy it. Therefore, we'll do X/or try another approach. The reality model, from Key and Sussman and Hinkley, and most recently from Sobel, looks like this:

Policy ---> Public---> Confirmed
Decision Opinion or Revised
Decision

Erikson et al (1980) lamented, "Complete understanding of the linkage between public opinion and policy is beyond the present knowledge of political scientists." In their 1991 edition, Erikson et al upgrade linkage with the statement that public opinion "is far from inconsequential" on the basis of incomplete evidence.

Here is a context for strong linkage, and for the pure public opinion model. In February, 1993, the Congress didn't know what to make of the new President's proposed budget. Legislators scurried to find out what their constituents thought. Presumably some used polls. Surely, the respondents were no better equipped to evaluate the budget proposal than the legislators - my recurring theme - but there was, at least, a climate of openness to public opinion in policy decision-making. So, one context for a substantial beta-weight for public opinion is uncertainty by those making policy. Perhaps they are grasping at straw polls. Sadly, when policy makers need public opinion the most, the validity of that opinion is poorest. Note, by the way, that the vote on the general outlines of the Clinton budget was a party line vote. Politics out-beta'd public opinion by a huge margin.

The link between public opinion and policy decision may be hidden in multiple sources of political influence, as in the House Appropriations Committee and the Clinton budget, or just under-researched. My hunch, and surely yours as well, is that the link is as plain as the nose on James Carville's face. But that was probably the same hunch researchers had 20-30 years ago, when linkage was not confirmed. We need a fresh wave of linkage research. Missing is the ringing example which places "the will of the people" as an equal in the room with other Cabinet or staff advisors when policy is being formed, although few doubt it occupies a chair.

Dysfunctional Decision-Making.

Survey NOpinion has not yet, then, been linked to government policy any more than have qualified attitudes. My hypotheses are commonsensical but regrettable: 1) as polling has increased, linkage has increased, and 2) the continued inclusion of NOpinion will lead to

poorer decisions. NOpinion is being counted as legitimate opinion; decisions may turn on overconsideration of invalid opinion.

What to do?.

III. RESEARCH METHODS WHICH REDUCE NOPINION.

You are familiar with filtering devices to find qualified respondents.

Here is a less expensive way to account for NOpinion: weight demographic cells by incidence of voting, as we now weight candidate polls. If weighting issue opinion isn't being done, I'll bet we do it soon. Weighting issue opinion has the further advantage of reducing the social desirability effect, more prevalent among those offering unqualified answers.

I am impressed by the simplicity of another approach: don't bury the "Don't Know/No Opinion" response options. In September, 1991, the CBS-New York Times poll asked, "Should the Senate vote to confirm Clarence Thomas as a Justice of the Supreme Court, or vote against Thomas, or can't you say. 24% said yes, 11 said no, and 65% said they couldn't say. This didn't work for a mature issue. In interviews since last July, I asked the questions used by the CBS-New York Times polls on abortion. In a split sample, I placed "Don't Know" and "No Opinion before vs. after the response options. In the customary placement after the response options, 6.4% said, "Don't Know/No Opinion." When placed first, 7.6% said, "Don't Know/No Opinion. No difference.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.

Polls between elections are increasingly available to politicians for policy guidance. Yet, the polls produce the unintended side-effect of delivering to politicians the opinions of people from whom they did not previously hear: those who don't vote. Non-voters and those who hold NOpinion are the least educated, those with the least political knowledge.

The polls contain too much NOpinion, but we should ultimately be able to filter NOpinion out, either at the point of the questionnaire or in intelligent interpretation of data.

Do the non-voters know enough to be suffered in poll results? Surely, they know more today than in the past. Yet, there is more to know. The goal of an enlightened electorate remains legitimate, but we will have to be content now with the process of moving toward enlightenment rather than achieving it. The nation has survived without enlightenment, and will continue to do so as we thrash out the embarrassments of NOpinion and misapplied linkage.

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