

Polling, Policy, and Public Opinion

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The Case Against Heeding the
“Voice of the People”

Robert Weissberg

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POLLING, POLICY, AND PUBLIC OPINION

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Preface

*P*olling, *Policy, and Public Opinion* argues that the hundreds of garden-variety polls ostensibly revealing public appetite for expanding social welfare are seriously misleading. Moreover, heeding these demands is not “true democracy.” It is not that these thirstings are insincere or totally valueless. Democratic elections may be entirely about best appeasing these cravings, and clever candidates may heed them carefully. The key is separating unthinking, poll-induced wishes from sound, hardheaded counsel. Majorities, as the polls relentlessly proclaim, *really* do yearn for government subsidized medical care, old-age assistance, lavishly funded education, and all else that Washington labors to supply. Unfortunately, that millions genuinely lust after something hardly makes this longing authoritative, let alone sensible. Everyone covets an illness-free life and government rightly spends billions to eradicate disease, yet it would be preposterous to hold public officials accountable for eternal life. Ceaselessly pursuing the hopeless is a sign of mental illness. Legitimizing the parade of “government should provide more help to . . .” poll responses is equally dangerous. No matter how heartfelt, they are not policy directives, and to label them authentic “democratic mandates” is duplicitous.

Thus stated, *Polling, Policy, and Public Opinion* appears polemical, another battle cry over the welfare state, regardless of scholarly window-dressing. Reasonable truth resides in this accusation insofar as its data will undoubtedly provide ammunition to antistatist plotters. We also reaffirm Madison’s antique warning regarding the havoc unleashed by catering to the public’s passions. Conceivably, a handful of Republicans might repeat our conclusions to justify “mean-spirited” resistance to the erstwhile “compassion.” Conservatives long suspecting that today’s social scientists covertly impose liberal ideology to skew “scientific” research will likewise appreciate our messages. And, for good measure, the liberal faithful intent on denouncing this “reactionary screed” will easily prevail given today’s peculiar academic evidentiary rules. Their misguided inspection will quickly bare

“depraved” funding sources, “politically incorrect citations,” and untold other smoking-gun clues exposing yet one more Vast-Right-Wing-Conspiracy exemplar.

Reality is a bit more complex, and an irony exists here begging to be told. Some personal history. This enterprise germinated during the late 1970s, and its overall thrust—deep skepticism regarding the *vox populi*’s pseudodemocratic social welfare cravings—was present at inception. Launching an ideologically tinged crusade never crossed my mind, however. The goal was a technically oriented research project, nothing else. Ideologically, I was still a “big government” disciple, although my optimism was slowly eroding. If this disinterest is not to be trusted, let me confess: I voted for McGovern in 1972 and Carter in 1976! “Moderate liberal” would aptly describe my views back then. Ideological apostasy occurred years after launching this project.

As I understood it, only conventional political behavior research was being pursued. My sole aim then—as it is now—was to demonstrate that altering questionnaire construction was a political act. Such endeavors typically went absolutely unnoticed by the guardians of disinterested disciplinary science. Surely, for example, substituting “Russia” for “the Soviet Union” in a questionnaire experiment hardly invited charges of covert revisionism regardless of outcomes or who utilized the results.

Still, two recent changes might give credence to the ideology mongering accusation. First, let me concede that I have steadily gravitated toward free-market oriented solutions to social welfare dilemmas. The shift has been entirely pragmatic. Observing a parade of failed bureaucratic intervention has weakened my faith in big government as the mighty engine of genuine compassion. Although this personal conversion might explain some of the book’s language, even occasional passion, I seriously doubt whether it has altered its conclusion one iota. Had this study been executed twenty years ago, the outcome would be nearly identical.

This project’s alleged polemical coloration flows far more from transformations within the craft of professional political science than research bias. The intellectual context in which this research now exists has metamorphosed from its commencement. With scant exception, the liberal views once coloring public opinion research are now front and center. For example, a new scholarly public opinion book, issued by Columbia University Press, prominently announced the book’s intended contribution to left-wing politics (Lewis 2001, xiv). This ideological openness would probably been unthinkable thirty years back.

This ideological penetration is hardly some nefarious, conscious bias. Rather, the culprit is an encompassing *Zeitgeist* directing intellectual traffic

in some directions but not others. Many younger scholars barely notice its force—its norms are unspoken. And, this infusion has been welcomed, even judged legitimate, as “progress” although not too loudly, lest outsiders, particularly scientific inquiry benefactors, become alarmed. This politicization may even be a more general phenomenon—just read the inaugural speeches now annually offered by American Political Science Association presidents or the proliferation of ideologically driven convention panels.

When I first entered disciplinary life in the mid-1960s, disdaining “normative” analysis (addressing values beyond scientific proof) was *de rigueur* among those seeking political *science* prestige. Future progress, it was heartily declared in all best places, required abandoning advocacy and letting the empirical chips fall where they may. Partisans of “values” would be consigned to discipline’s dustbin; virtuous analysts labored merely to prove or disprove factual statements. Today, by contrast, advancing one’s career, even without publishing, demands a fresh sensitivity to the political winds blowing from the spectrum’s left side. Heretical views are to be kept quiet. Anonymous reviewers attuned to “social justice” or some similar bandwagon cannot be challenged as one might contest false criminal accusations. The unnoticed exodus of unemployable nonbelievers or those morally uncomfortable with acquiescence compounds this penetration. Even disbeliever survivors within the profession must be wary of “harmful” unflattering implication or favorably citing *The Bell Curve*-like books.

In this newly political sensitized setting, the once appreciated “just the facts ma’am” style easily becomes an ideological assault if the facts are “wrong.” Worse, conventional let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may 1960s behavioralism is now *inherently* “political.” This transformation flows from today’s academically fashionable view that everything, absolutely everything including hard science, is at heart political. In that context, escape from ideological labeling is futile; it comes with today’s disciplinary territory. In the case at hand, then, demonstrating public social welfare thirsting shallowness can *only* be interpreted as right-wing counterrevolution vindictiveness against the truly compassionate modern state. In short, what originated as dispassionate social science, albeit with “real world” implications, is now judged mean-spirited polemical thanks to a shifting backdrop.

If my “objectivity” is still not believed, the doubting reader should read the concluding sections of chapters five and six. Here I briefly explain that if there were an “alternative universe” in which Libertarians dominated Washington, these warnings regarding poll influence would be equally fervent. Make no mistake, I personally dislike “made-in-Washington” grand social engineering remediation schemes. Even worse, however, is the transformation of the

Republic into governance by hidden-hand plebiscite. In the final analysis, the bumbling welfare state can be survived, wastefulness and all. I am less optimistic about surrendering power to a nonelected clerisy aided and abetted by a mass media intoxicated with superficial outrage. The dangers here far exceed extravagance.

Let me also address this enterprise's heft considering its modest aim. Even ideological sympathizers, let alone believers in cold-hearted social science, might wonder why two hundred plus pages of labored academic prose are necessary to announce points obvious to the economically literate. A few terse sentences regarding the silliness of heeding poll advice on labyrinthine public policy should be sufficient. Why not just execute a few differently worded polls and let the results speak unadorned—if confronted with costs, externalities, nonoptimal choices and similar inescapable real-world complexities, “public opinion” differs substantially from what conventional simple-minded surveys show. Do we honestly need verbiage galore to certify that citizens are generally befuddled by most public policy debates? Are we not beating a dead horse far beyond strict federal guidelines regulating battering expired equines?

Our response is that a few “counterpolls” cannot dislodge the giant edifice called “The Standing Consensus Regarding Public Support for Social Welfare Expansion, As Told to the Ever Attentive Pollster.” This beast is impervious to a single well-aimed bullet to the brain. This is hardly speculation—the National Taxpayers Union (NTU) has regularly commissioned well-crafted polls showing opposition to increased federal spending or higher taxes. Despite the NTU's eager publicity efforts, these data are virtually unknown outside of conservative circles ever anxious for a glimmer of hope. An entire lifetime could be spent analyzing surveys without encountering the NTU's dissenting findings, especially if one toils in the academy. In an environment overflowing with public pulse-taking, merely adding a handful of divergent findings accomplishes zero. Ditto for all the qualms regarding *vox populi* wisdom to set public policy. The existing entitlement consensus is smothering. At best, survey data collectors might mention “but a tiny number of other polls utilizing different formats challenge public veracity and report somewhat different results.” Securing a footnote is not our aim.

Bulkiness flows from the deceptively intricate nature of this meretricious survey created consensus. Undergirding the “we want more government aid for [fill in the blank]” question parade is an immense web of critical methodological and theoretical connective tissue. “Theology” replete with vast catechism is a more apt depiction. Elements range from slippery “democracy”

and “civic competency” definitions to catalogues of anfractuious opaque statistical techniques useful for uncovering furtive, though desired, outcomes. Also scattered about are alleged axiomatic truths surviving only by repeated citation and untold misrepresentations on “sensitive” topics. Outsiders cannot possibly appreciate the extent to which these subterranean mental habits thrive as scholarly research conventions. If statist survey outcroppings should mysteriously vanish tomorrow, identical fresh poll results would instantly reappear. An army of well-schooled analysts would have the data factories up and running within days. If a convincing counterargument is going to be advanced, this thesis must address what lurks below, the genetic DNA blueprint, so-to-speak, not the individual progeny. In military campaign terminology, our analysis might be likened to tedious infantry ground assaults reclaiming territory foot by foot, not launching a few cruise missiles at enemy headquarters.

Equally important is a goal wholly disciplinary in character. The dictates of modesty aside, my hope is to redirect public opinion research away from today’s infatuation with statistically extracting “deep meaning” from inconsequentiality. You can’t get blood from a turnip even with a high-tech turnip press. To further compound this immodesty sin, this endeavor hopes to render the present crude questionnaire item obsolete. Current public thinking probes are hardly more sophisticated than when George Gallop launched the first primitive inquires some seventy years ago. The exigencies of telephone polling have compounded this shallowness. Only our statistical extraction techniques have grown more refined, not measurement itself. Perhaps this effort can redirect scholarship toward greater measurement precision.

Centuries ago, Tacitus wrote that history’s highest purpose was “to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.” Scholarly convention regarding acknowledgments entails a lengthy compilation of helpers plus the “and all the others too numerous to mention by name.” I certainly will honor this venerable custom of acknowledging the commendable, although, truth to be told, I wish that this list were longer. More about this unsettling point below. The Sarah Scaife Foundation, whose most generous financial support made this project possible, is deeply thanked. John Baden, erstwhile Montana farmer, Beau Brummell free-market intellectual, and all-purpose *mensch*, also deserves eternal gratitude. Fred Wall, Martha Roberts, and all the other Angus Reid Group experts did a superb job of data collection, analysis, and insight into a world beyond my ken. I could not have asked for a more stellar performance. Dixie Trinkle skillfully transcribed interviews and corrected

untold typographical errors. Charles C. DeWitt, as usual, provided his invaluable stealthy assistance. The Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green University generously afforded me the time and support to complete this manuscript. Toby Wahl at Palgrave deserves endless praise for his careful editing, but I'll skip the details since he would undoubtedly remove them in the interest of brevity. And, speaking of the "usual suspects," once again Erika Gilbert was always there with her superb free advice, a nice cup of coffee (not too much sugar!), and, most critically, the emotional support absolutely vital to a project of this magnitude.

Now, alas, to depart radically from custom. An unpleasantness has infused this project, and these "evil words and deeds," too, deserve proper mention. After all, we are obligated to future historians curious about academy-based intellectual life. We'll start gently. On innumerable occasions, I sought reactions from fellow academics, only to be greeted with stone silence. Even a handful with an "obvious" interest in this project—including a few known to me personally—unexpectedly became mute. Venturing beyond familiar intellectual turf is always arduous, and friendly encouragement, together with wise (if discomfiting advice) is essential if all the obstacles are to be conquered. Writing books is always lonely, but this project was more solitary than necessary. Maybe everything got lost in the mail or intercepted by space aliens.

More serious are those unnamed souls whose conduct might charitably be depicted as poisoning the intellectual soil. These deeds, as Tacitus admonishes, cannot go unrecognized, however fleeting the notice. Each culprit, in his or her own distinctive fashion, made a difficult task even more vexatious. Although these painful events deserve itemized public commemoration, the repeated sage advice of wiser heads will be heeded. The careful telling of these horrid tales must wait another venue.

Why even acknowledge sordid episodes in a place universally reserved for cordiality? This is not a petty settling of scores; the issue is more serious. Today's academy is troubled; anti-intellectualism grows stronger, often welcomed by anxious-to-please amateur administrators. What makes—or should make—academic life supremely enjoyable is, to invoke that venerable cliché, the life of the mind. Uncovering truth is the *raison d'être* of our profession. We are scholars, not factory workers plying our trade with tools, training, and methods to increase piecemeal productivity. When intellectual life is reduced to industrial production tempered by petty squabbling and chronic mendacity, what is left?