Public opinion polling has become a mainstay of our daily news diet. Nearly every major television news network—CBS, ABC, NBC, CNN, FOX—and every major newspaper and newsmagazine—New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report—conduct weekly, if not daily polls. Commercial and university-affiliated polling organizations such as Gallup, Louis Harris, Roper, Zogby, National Opinion Research Center, and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan are busy tapping the American people’s opinions on a range of political and social issues. In a sense, contemporary American politics can be boiled down to “polling and governing,” with an occasional election thrown in to catch large-scale shifts in opinion.

The routinization of modern scientific polling has had the effect of legitimizing polls in the minds of the American people and making polls an acceptable part of everyday political life. Among serious scholars, political commentators, and politicians, however, the reliance on public opinion polls may be viewed as either a blessing or a curse.

The selections in this chapter address a serious controversy over polling: Is polling good or bad for the polity? Pollster Frank Newport presents a strong argument in favor of polling as a guide to lawmakers who are charged with making decisions about public policy. Newport’s thesis that “polls are good” is based on the long-held view that the collective judgment of the people is likely to be better than the opinion of any smaller group of governing elites.

The distinguished political scientist Robert Weissberg offers a contrary view. Weissberg presents a wholly unorthodox view of polls, claiming that “surveys cannot provide useful advice.” His reasoning is based on an assessment of two major factors related to polling: the ignorance of the public and the ignorance of the pollsters. His critique of the modern poll indicates that even though polls are widely conducted and analyzed, and conclusions are drawn from them, their value and legitimacy are still matters of some debate.
Polling Matters
Frank Newport

...The single most important reason why polls are so valuable is that they provide us with a way of collecting and collating a distilled, summarized wisdom based on the input of the members of a society. This wisdom can be used as the basis for altering and improving the direction of the societies in which we live.

This is based on the key proposition that groups of people often have more wisdom among them than does any one person alone. The collected opinions, observations, and attitudes of all of the individuals in a population provide a distillation of knowledge and insights that is more likely to be sensible and useful than the insights and knowledge of single individuals or small groups of people independently. There is a great deal that can be done with that wisdom—more than just measuring it, studying it, and talking about it. It can be used to help guide a society forward.

In a mass society, polling is the only practical way to bring this knowledge together. The power of polling lies in its ability to harness wisdom and apply it to the problems of governing societies and making decisions about what those societies should do.

This is a pretty radical thesis. It implies that insight, wisdom, and knowledge levels increase with larger and larger numbers of people. This flies in the face of the feelings of many who hold just the opposite thesis: that wisdom and knowledge decrease as groups become larger and larger. There is in fact a long history of distrust of the mob or group, with a concomitant reverence accorded the contributions made by individuals and brilliant, single-minded leaders. Here I'm arguing that the views of the mob, as it were, have the potential to be extremely valuable to all concerned, and that the views of individuals or small elites often leave much to be desired.

One of the ways to approach this issue, I think, is to look around us. There is something very natural about the derivation of great value from many discrete actions collected together. It appears as if nature itself operates such that the combined actions of millions of entities in a social system can ultimately work to produce the most adaptive and useful structural patterns and actions for that system. Similarly, while the attitudes of single individuals in human
social systems may seem insignificant in and of themselves, one attitude coupled with another and another and another ultimately brings together a totality of thought that is much more than the sum of its parts. Every person in a human social system is distinct in many ways and has a different genetic inheritance. In addition, by adulthood, humans have lived through and experienced life in distinctly different ways, reflecting the results of their cultural exposure. When the results of all of these differences in background and exposure are brought together, it constitutes the basis for an extraordinarily powerful body of knowledge. And that knowledge is gathered and processed by polls.

The core principle here is straightforward. The bringing together of all of the experiences and knowledge of a group of individuals allows for a distillation of truth that is more profound than an alternative that involves only the experience and knowledge of a few. It is my conviction that in many situations no individual or small group knows as much about the real world in which problems originate (and in which they must be solved) as larger groups and populations. No one physician knows as much about a disease or treatment as do all physicians combined, and no one rocket scientist knows as much about the space shuttle as do all rocket scientists put together.

No single football coach or sportswriter can decide on the best college football team in the nation as fairly as a group of many coaches or sportswriters. No single corporate purchasing agent’s views on the progress of the economy are as likely to be accurate as are the views of hundreds of purchasing agents amalgamated together. No central economic authority can determine the value of companies as efficiently as the actions of millions of stock buyers and sellers acting individually on the major stock exchanges. No juror is as likely to produce a fair decision in a court case as are twelve jurors with their collectively combined views. And, in the most general sense, no individual can make as effective and efficient a decision on the broad direction a society should take as the collected views of all that society’s citizens.

It is this last point that seems to generate the most resistance from observers. Many well-meaning citizens feel that powerful or smart people—rather than the public and its collected insights—are in the best position to provide the information and understanding that a society needs to rely on for direction.

Of course, nothing is absolute. There are certainly situations in which individual guidance is exactly what is needed. No one argues that the opinions of a broad cross section of society can provide the same insights into the treatment of cancer as can the judgment of trained specialists. No one argues that the views of all of the people in a society are as valuable in making a decision on the course of a hurricane as are the insights of meteorological specialists, or that random samples of average citizens can provide meaningful insights into decisions on the selection of the proper flu vaccine at the beginning of the influenza season.

But the broad principle here is that the thoughts, opinions, and insights of larger groups of people in many cases have the potential to be more valuable than the thoughts, opinions, insights, or wisdom of just one person or a small number of people. Or at the least, they add significant value to the decision making of whoever is in power...
There is no shortage of examples. One of the most contentious issues facing the United States today is health care. Certainly, Harvard professors and legislative committee staffers who focus on health care can have encyclopedic knowledge of health care statistics and the intricacies of how health payment systems work. But these experts may never have set foot in a charity hospital, have probably never had to sit in an emergency waiting room for hours seeking diagnosis and treatment, and have never gone without medical help as a result of not knowing where to go or how to pay for it. Average Americans, on the other hand, have collectively seen it all: hospitals, bad doctors, bureaucracy, HMOs, Medicaid, and ridiculously expensive drugs. Their combined experiences could provide the basis for a textbook of health care wisdom far exceeding that of the experts.

It is thus no surprise that the health care plan proposed by the Clinton administration in the 1990s, guided by experts meeting behind closed doors, failed miserably. What was missing? At least in part, a strong reliance on the wisdom of the people. Hillary Clinton and her task force gave short shrift to the tremendous expertise lodged in the "collected together" insights of the people, and proposed a system that the people were unwilling to accept. Imagine how much better the proposed health care reform system might have been if every aspect of it incorporated comprehensive polling of the people who were expected to live with it, examining how individuals dealt with health care issues in the real world and what they thought might most effectively be changed to make the system work to the greater benefit of all involved.

As I've noted, the use of collective opinions may not apply in all circumstances and is certainly not appropriate as the basis for decision in every situation. The collected wisdom of all of the people in a society isn't of as much value when those in positions of power are making informed decisions about the best way to send astronauts into space, arguing arcane principles of law, deciding on which submarine systems to fund, or revising complex elements and loopholes in the tax code. But many of the major decisions made by those in power don't deal with highly specialized issues. They're concerned with matters quite close to the daily experience of the average person in a society. These include social policies relating to such matters as race relations, welfare and poverty, deciding on the best way to define certain activities as deviant (sexual behavior, alcohol, smoking, drugs, abortion) and imposing sanctions when they occur, the impact of specific economic policies on daily life, and such issues as taxes, health care, and education. The citizens of a society can and do have a great deal of knowledge about these areas of concern. It is my conviction that the average people of a society are able to provide wisdom that has great value when these types of issues and problems are on the policy-making agenda.

DOCTORS, JURIES, AND BUSINESS

Doctors are increasingly figuring out that they simply can't make the best possible and most informed decisions about the diagnosis and treatment for their patients all by themselves—no matter how smart the doctors may be.
There is simply too much to take into account. Physicians are thus relying more and more on the collective wisdom of their colleagues to help guide their decision making. What's called the evidence-based medicine (EBM) movement assumes that any one physician, no matter how well trained, cannot have all of the knowledge at his or her fingertips that is needed to properly diagnose and prescribe treatment for every condition that presents itself. The EBM approach argues that the individual physician should rely on the collective insights of many different experts (and the existing database of research findings) in deciding how to handle any given patient diagnosis and treatment plan. It may be damaging to the doctor's ego to admit that help is needed, but it's ultimately more beneficial to the patient.

... The American jury system assumes that a group of individuals with various backgrounds and experiences will reach a verdict that has a higher probability of being just and fair than would occur if any one person—including even a learned and highly experienced judge—made the decision. Each juror brings a different perspective to bear on a case. Each has different levels of background knowledge. All of these varied skills and differing perspectives help make sure, so the theory goes, that the jury renders a just decision.

The stock market is a method of pooling thousands of individual perceptions of the value of a business and arriving at an assessment of what that value is. The pricing of a stock through this mechanism is often called a perfect process that takes into account a vast amount of knowledge and input that extends far beyond what would be possible if only a selected subset of stock analysts were called upon to value the stock...

In one of the most intriguing developments in recent years, new search engines on the World Wide Web operate by analyzing which sites are most frequently used by the individuals who begin a search on a given topic. The assumption behind the algorithms that drive these sites is that the record of the collective actions of a large group of people looking for information on a topic can be the most valuable guide for future individuals seeking information about that same topic. And preference marketing, which is gaining prominence in business circles, attempts to follow the purchase decisions of individuals in order to build a trial that suggests the products or services they might like in the future—based on the collective actions of others with similar interests...

One of the other reasons collective opinions of a broad group are valuable is the fact that they produce effective decisions. Experts focusing on social issues and policies often come up with programs or laws doomed for failure when they ignore the views of the people potentially affected by such measures. When experts and bureaucrats spin out programs and impose them on a people who don't understand them and don't want them, they simply don't work in the long run. When decision makers and bureaucrats view the opinion of the people upon whom programs must be imposed as irrelevant, the programs have a lower probability of success...
POLLING MATTERS

Even with skilled pollsters and survey scientists, how reasonable is it that public opinion can be increasingly taken into account in governing a country? Even if one accepts the idea that the people of the society should have their opinions used by government and elected representatives on a regular basis, it is of course impossible to enlist the public’s help in making each of the thousands of decisions that come up in any given year. Moreover, some of these decisions involve technical issues that are beyond the understanding of the majority of the population. A government large enough to run a major state or a country has a huge range of activity. As a result, it assembles legions of bureaucrats, experts, commissions, and task forces to help in making daily decisions and moving forward. There is no doubt that the citizens—no matter how powerfully one believes in democracy—cannot be involved in all of what goes on. The issue becomes one of how frequently and in how much detail the people of the society can and should be asked for guidance. George Gallup addressed this concern more than sixty years ago:

There is something tempting about the view that an aristocracy of specialists should lead the people . . . We must agree that most people do not and in the nature of things, cannot have the necessary knowledge to judge the intimate details of policy . . . There are things that cannot be done by public opinion, just as there are things that can only be done by public opinion . . . The ultimate values of politics and economics, the judgments on which public policy is based, do not come from special knowledge or from intelligence alone. They are compounded from the day-to-day experience of the men and women who together make up the society we live in. That is why public opinion polls are important today. Instead of being attempts to sabotage representative government, kidnap the members of Congress, and substitute the taxi driver for the experts in politics, as some critics insist, public opinion research is a necessary and valuable aid to truly representative government. What is evident here is that representatives will be better able to represent if they have an accurate measure of the wishes, aspirations, and needs of different groups within the general public.¹

Dr. Gallup’s point is straightforward: the people of an entity of almost any size can be and should be trusted to provide input into its day-to-day running. The people of a societal entity can make decisions on the overall direction of the world in which they live. I’m not talking about specific decisions on daily minutiae or choices among involved and technical policy alternatives, but on the broad direction and general policies that their representatives adopt and ultimately affect them. The people of a society can be trusted to operate as a board of directors, giving insight and input into the broader direction of what the people they elected should do.

If the fundamental idea behind a democracy is recognizing the wisdom in the aggregated experiences of its citizens, then polling is actually a more efficient way to collect this wisdom than the vote.
This is a particularly important insight. Our object as citizens is to move the society forward in the best possible fashion. For that purpose we cannot afford to miss out on the opinions of the lazy and those who choose not to participate in voting. Society needs the input of all its citizens. Indeed, some countries take this idea to the extreme and have made voting mandatory. The United States is not yet at that point, and the proportion of the population that votes is now down to 50 percent in some presidential elections, with the proportion lower still in other elections. A “wisdom at any cost” position argues that polls conducted more frequently among all of the people provide valuable input that is missing if the views of voters are all that is taken into account.

All in all, a society can’t have it both ways. Either the people are the best source of decisions on how to run the society or they are not. The basic principle of democracy is that the people are ultimately a better source for making decisions on what the collectivity should do than is any other alternative. There are good reasons for the hybrid model we have today, wherein people vote for representatives or experts they put in place to facilitate the society’s day-to-day functioning. But leaving the people’s opinions out of the picture until the next vote is a way of saying that the people have only limited brainpower and can be trusted only so far. That’s wrong. Representatives need to spend more time between elections maximizing the valuable insights derivable from the public they represent. To ignore the wisdom of the people is folly to the extreme.

If the people can be trusted to vote for representatives, they should certainly have their wisdom taken into account after elections as well. Our best path to progress is to commit to the idea that polls can and should be a positive, fundamentally important element of a well-functioning democratic society. The people’s voice is wise, and almost always on target, forming what Dr. George Gallup proclaimed as the true pulse of democracy.

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