

Forgetting People: What's Wrong with Public Opinion Research Today, and How to Fix It

By Steve Farkas

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Today's public opinion researchers are grappling with serious challenges facing their profession—declining response rates, cell phones, push polls, inappropriate use of internet surveys. While they are very right to be concerned about threats to quality, their focus is misplaced. The biggest menace facing this industry is not borne of response rates or the challenges of technology. The real problem is with the very quality of our surveys—the questions we ask, how we describe results, and how we allow results to be used.

There is a bitter irony here, because we have more surveys than ever, yet our society's understanding of the public's mind on key issues is impoverished. In his 2003 presidential address to the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), Mark Shulman called for “a rebalancing of our profession so that we recognize the limitations of ‘response rates’ and other simple measures of survey precision and quality, while, more importantly, placing more weight on our profession's insights and contributions to social and public policy decision making.” The good news is that the problems—most troubling with respect to surveys that deal with policy issues—are identifiable, and the solutions are within our grasp.

Let us begin with the problems.

Surveys commissioned by public interest groups on policy issues are a particular weak point in the industry.

Nominally nonpartisan, public interest groups commission opinion studies on their respective issues, first because they want to generate news coverage to publicize their cause. Such surveys typically find that the issue that is of uppermost concern to the organization is also uppermost in the public's mind. What's more, the surveys show that when it comes to whatever the cause is, the public is not only deeply concerned but is willing to pay more in

taxes. When elections are near, the surveys will also show that the public will vote against politicians who don't take the requisite stand. Added up, all these polls show us that citizens care about everything, will happily pay tax rates that surpass 100 percent, and will vote against all politicians if they fail to take any stand.

Unless we're ready to say the public is completely irrational, the inescapable conclusion is that something is wrong with what we're doing. Too often, we don't ask respondents to establish priorities, we don't put their attitudes toward one topic in context with others, we don't get their responses to real tradeoffs in public policy—in short, we give voice to a fantasy public, not a real one. But policymakers need to know just how troubled people really are by a problem, how excited they are by a proposal—indeed, how much they have thought about the proposal. We are getting dangerously close to a point where surveys are merely guaranteed commodities whose results any interest group can purchase to show its cause has the public's support.

The industry's questionnaires have “a give them everything” mentality.

Surveys shy away from forcing people to prioritize their preferences and choose among choices—everything is a problem, anything can be a solution. In the survey world, little attention is paid to the intensity of people's opinions and sentiments. The “very's” and “somewhat's” are very often combined, so the vast majority believes something. There's a shying away from putting the issue in context—how does federal aid to the arts stack up in priority to education or defense?

In the real world, the one that policymakers have to grapple with, choices have to be made. Not all problems get the same level of attention, not all solutions merit attention, and resources are limited. In the real world, solutions have consequences and tradeoffs, but survey questions rarely raise the consequences of a choice.

The most important distinction survey research routinely fails to make is when the public is engaged and thoughtful enough to have something meaningful to say about solutions—and when it's not. Some years ago, when welfare reform was preoccupying Washington, D.C., Public Agenda did a study on public attitudes toward the issue. The level of engagement was extremely high, so much so that people were able to trace the structure of what they thought reform ought to look like with impressive detail and thoughtfulness. Certain education issues also reveal this level of consideration. But when it comes to evaluating solutions and proposals for many other specific policy initiatives, our surveys often assume laughably high levels of attention from the public. Dutifully reporting the percentage of the public supporting a solution is not doing our duty when we know—or should know—that the public hasn't given it much thought.

Control of the press release is where the problems often hide.

The survey house may ask fair questions, but the press release reporting the findings, which is usually controlled by the interest group, will cherry-pick favorable ones and bury those they don't like. The big report and the full survey will present the context and the modifying findings, but that is a weak defense.

We can easily blame the press for not behaving responsibly and reading the full findings. But we can also ask, do researchers fulfill their obligations if they stand aside while the client massages the findings to highlight those most favorable to its cause, in a press release that is most likely the only thing anyone will read? By its very nature, the press release strives for drama and can only call attention to a few key findings—that is a reality. But it should not be a license to mislead.

Too often, the studies are presented through a formulaic format that dryly reports too much detail without insight and without a story.

Today's public opinion researchers make much too much of differences among groups that are simply not important, with no substantive reason to pay attention to them. How many reports have we seen that belabor trivial regional differences, for example, without even trying to explain why we should care about these differences? I remember one headline about the gender gap becoming a chasm. Its biggest piece of evidence was a data point that compared women and men 68 percent to 59 percent on a minor attitudinal question. Statistically significant, yes. But did it point to a chasm between men and women? Differences across groups can be meaningful when discussing shifts in voting or in spending or life and death in medical research. But when they involve perceptions, and when they are small differences in degree, not of kind, they're often just not that important.

The sad suspicion is that such differences are merely filler, used to thicken the report and show clients they're getting their money's worth. Or they're the creation of young researchers over-trained by academia to look for and report every difference because they might squeeze an article out of it. But when everything is reported just in case it's important, nothing is important. It is the responsibility of survey researchers to say something relevant, to make the call: this is important, and this is why it's important.

Researchers have little or no feel for how people are thinking about the issue and why they are answering as they do.

There is an even more troubling reason why little is done to tease out themes and explain differences: Few researchers are talking to real people before or after they conduct their surveys. Today, it is entirely possible to be a recognized public opinion expert without

having sat face to face with an ordinary citizen and interviewed him or her in an open-ended fashion. Amazingly, the very profession responsible for keeping its fingers on the pulse of the public is disconnected from it. Most studies lack the qualitative work that will give researchers a feel for the public's take.

For the same reason, survey questions ignore the human voice and give precedence to technical correctness. We end up with logically balanced questions that have no relation to how people talk and think about the issue. It's a wonder that so many people are willing to answer our surveys, given how artificial and boring the questions can be.

Arguably, the single most destructive trend in research is the decoupling of qualitative work from quantitative work. A recoupling of such work is naturally the most effective remedy, if done correctly.

Questionnaire writers forget the people.

Our surveys are often out of touch with the public because the questionnaires' content—what they cover, and what they don't—is dictated by the policy debate as it is structured by elites or interest groups or media coverage. But people are often in a very different place. Sometimes the words the public uses to talk about an issue are different, along with its definition of the problem and the values it brings to bear. The questionnaire writers interrogate their own sense of the issue, talk to the clients and take into account their concerns, perhaps review some newspaper clippings, and probably have some internal review within the survey house.

Control of the questionnaire itself is also an issue. The client obviously has the right to review the questionnaire and suggest topics for investigation. But while clients will sometimes make useful suggestions, amateur hour is at hand when we let them become the wordsmiths. Yet we know that sometimes a survey house will bend over backwards, asking questions that are too vague or too technical or too specific, just to please the client. A questionnaire written by a committee will end up being a negotiated compromise whose ultimate goal is to satisfy different interests instead of capturing the public's authentic voice. Even if it is the clients' money, how wrong can we let them be?

More than ever, the survey business is a business with bottom-line concerns.

The focus on the bottom line—efficiency, profitability, economies of scale, and smooth work routines—has cost us dearly. Junior analysts with little experience and less creativity are writing the questionnaires—and they are evaluated based on turnaround, time on task, and their ability to follow standard operating procedures. Conveyor belt research is the end result, with questionnaire-writers making little effort to break new ground. Why try something new?

It's cheaper, faster and less risky to repeat someone else's questions. But repeating other people's "tested" questions often means merely that they have been used by someone else and no one has complained about it. With more companies publicly traded, this trend is likely to continue.

So what can the survey industry do to solve these problems? To start with, we must be wary of blaming others or expecting others to retrieve the situation. There is no point in waiting for disinterested academics to save the day—dogmatic lethargy, tedious presentation of results, and simple lack of resources limit their ability to be relevant. Media polls won't step up to fill the vacuum. Their polls can't help but reflect the immediacy of their business; they have little appetite for reflection or for non-controversy. Clients who commission issue polls are often committed to pushing an agenda they believe is good and right, so expecting them to have the discipline to consider otherwise is not realistic, either.

Probably the single most helpful change would be to insist on incorporating qualitative research into our work, simply because it addresses so many weaknesses. Other measures are obvious: Put survey items and findings in context, not isolation. Rely on more forced-choice questions. Focus the analysis on the quality and intensity of attitudes. Present public opinion with thematic coherence instead of getting bogged down in the minutiae of demographic differences when they don't matter. Insist that publication of results—including the press release—adheres to the spirit, not only the letter, of the findings. And there is something else: Revise the role of the top talent of research firms to have them do less selling and managing and get back to doing more of the things they know and like to do—good research.

There is more at stake here than professional pride or the economic viability of an industry. These are harshly simplistic times, and the democratic process needs the public more than ever. Our policy debates are driven by sloganeering partisans, or by media-hungry speakers who know that stridency gets air time, or by ideologues who refuse to engage the other side. Well-done surveys will show that Americans are more apt to be pragmatic than ideological, more morally centered than narrowly self-interested, more interested in improving outcomes than in scoring political points. Injecting the public's voice can thus moderate the harshness and shallowness of policy debates. But this will not happen with surveys that ask the public to predict how long wars will last, or to give thumbs up or down to legislative proposals they've never heard of, or to relentlessly trick them into supporting one cause after another. The public's voice can be reduced to being just more noise in an already noisy system or elevated so that it improves the quality of our democracy. The practitioners of survey research have something to say about which way it goes.