

## TIKKUN

A Bimonthly Jewish & Interfaith Critique of Politics, Culture & Society

Sept/Oct 1999 | | <http://www.tikkun.org>

<<http://www.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm/action/tikkun/issue/tik9909/article/990913d.html>>

# Selling the People's Voice

## Massified Opinion, Mass Evasion

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*Thomas Fitzgerald*

Never have public opinion polls been used to greater political effect than those of the past year which asked the same question over and again, "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way President Clinton is handling his job as president?" A subsidiary question asked if respondents thought "the country is headed in the right direction," or in its version by Time/CNN polls, "How well do you think *things are going* in the country these days?" Since large percentages of selected citizens who replied to these beguiling questions assented to the *approve* answers, survey firms have claimed they demonstrate the nation's hearty affection for him.

Journalists and media commentators have noticed the puzzling contradiction between that reported approval and the President's repugnant behavior in office, also known to poll respondents. One might ask if media types also wonder about the content -- the meaning conveyed -- by these and similar polling questions repeatedly asked. Could they really be offering a capacious portmanteaux into which almost any construal, however banal, can find a place? Indeed, what can be meant by "the *job*" of this or any president in an enormously complex political economy, and do those polled know what "*handling*" that so-called job actually involves? And do a majority of respondents really agree about what might be "the *right* direction" for the country?

But any serious criticism of the polling industry must go well beyond questions like these. Because its management shrugs them off as quibbling by uninformed outsiders, such questions will hardly deflect it from its colonizing of American political life. And critics ought to reckon too, with the industry's many friends in high places. After all, opinion polling is welcomed by tutorial government agencies, economic forecasters, lobbyists, major party leaders, and much of the daily press. It provides an ostensible People's Voice; We are letting them have their say. Polls help to smooth over populist dissent by locating unseen lodes of agreement, and the appearance of country-wide solidarity on almost any issue, no matter how difficult: physician-assisted suicide, government subsidies for artists, late term abortion, urban land sprawl, bisexuals in the ministry, prayer in the schools, whatever.

For each of these or other issues, neat charts with confident conclusions will be paraded across TV screens and newsmag pages. They are made possible

by an extensive information apparatus, built on false cognitive assumptions and shabby work, with baneful consequences for culture and politics. What follows here calls attention to three major problem areas: the methods and practices used to acquire replies from respondents; sampling techniques for selecting them and biases built into those procedures; the reigning modernist epistemology now encroaching upon ontology itself, as described by philosopher Charles Taylor, and how his analysis can illuminate fundamental errors in polling surveys.

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Although polling consultants always defend results of polls as scientifically validated, their methods require no advanced theoretical science or virtuoso mathematical skills. Techniques of random sampling, upon which the whole edifice stands, are essentially routine. After a sample base of respondents is identified by one or more demographic markers, the rest mostly involves counting of hands raised or heads nodding. Telephone interviewers seated before computer screens in rows of sterile carrels in a distant city -- hardly conducive to conversation among peers in civil society -- are directed not to explore individual responses in any depth, or to dispute replies. Fixed response categories are much preferred for the questions so as to avoid additional work and imprecise codifying of ordinary talk. No use for a respondent to urge, "Hear me out!" or worry about possible adverse consequences of a cited proposal mixed in with beneficial ones, or about uncertainties of impact on other issues. No need either to be troubled for not having given enough thought to this or that problem. Everything can be crowded into a few offered categories ("strongly agree," "partially disagree" . . .). A hesitant yes, a reluctant no, an indifferent saying something to get rid of the caller, all are equally additive, thrown in with replies based on carefully considered, informed judgments. Reflection and nuance are simply shut out; serious thought is reserved for the pollster's staff when pondering how ambivalent assent can be translated into national conviction.

Polls do best with people who have an ability to answer presented questions with the unhesitating readiness of an actor to react to a script prompt. It's seen in those who have the knack for doing crossword puzzles, or responding quickly on I.Q. and aptitude tests. They have a shrewd sense of the kind of answers that testers seek and will approve, and are comfortable treating the whole exercise as one more code which calls for its own posture of regard. Preferred participants in both activities don't argue. Instead, as obliging subjects they fit themselves into narrowed spaces suitable for being measured by anonymous others, but in effect, they participate in a dumbing down of mind and spirit.

Focus groups, where recruited informants meet in a structured setting, have been employed in recent decades to supplement the limited data available from phone surveys. Not long ago, I asked an old friend who does marketing research whether the focus groups he has observed have worked out as expected. No, he said, the results are often disappointing, and some consultants are

beginning to question if whatever is learned is worth the effort. Given that self-conscious and deferential members are mixed in with bumptious or distracting sorts to discuss a subject chosen by others, observers in the darkened booth need the fine ear and insight of a good novelist to penetrate flat, sometimes irrelevant, hesitant, and vernacular speech. My friend went to say he felt uncomfortable about the contrast between the consultants and their invited subjects: those watching from behind the one-way glass, articulate, educated and often smugly ironic sorts who thrive among others like themselves; on the other side, people for whom everyday talk may not always be intended to convey rational information so much as to sustain a setting and confirm shared presence within it.

Remarkable it is how few in or out of public office, who speak for the Left or the Right, will challenge opinion surveying practices or their influence on legislative proceedings. Yet an anomaly persists: so much credibility granted to remote others who construct and ask simplistic questions of citizens, but who cannot be questioned in turn. Disappointing too, that intellectuals and academics otherwise protective of their own individuality and self-determination remain uncritical of assumptions built into survey practices that permit 500 or 1000 unconnected strangers scattered about the country, and who share no public space for discussion, to decide complicated, intertwined issues for all the rest of us.

Of course, when credentialled sorts appear on televised panels to discuss a topical issue, they are afforded time in advance for reviewing sources, making notes, and preparing well-considered opening statements. They also benefit from exchange of responses with co-panelists around the table who help to shape each others' views. In those events, often of congenial familiarity, conferees are not restricted to the phrasing of a discussion leader's questions, but are permitted to explore evaluative terms in a widening gyre. They might elaborate on a cited value, the way in which obligation and loyalty, for example, involve ties to honor, which stands in tension with shame. Ordinary people understand such inherent connections as well, but where is the milieu for them to interrogate a questionnaire?

Although the corporations which seek, collect and interpret survey data will primly assert their political neutrality, their practices are hardly non-partisan or innocent. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, the act of surveying public opinion is important to liberalism because it confirms the thesis that moral issues come down to mere opinion. When, for example, the first successful experimental cloning of animals was announced, national media commissioned polls to ask (some) people whether cloning of human beings should also be attempted. The collected numerical results were soon reported as expressing majority agreement with that possibility, and were made to convey the impression that a majority of people were already saying, *"Sure, why not?"* Commentary by cheerful journalists went on as if to suggest, *It's all settled!* and concluded that the public has continuing confidence in the march of medical technology. (Besides, they would add, cloning might permit a grieving couple to replace a dead child with another, biologically identical.) By leaving out

reference to possible consequences when constructing surveys about genetic, reproductive or other interventions into human life, pollsters do a serious disservice, making citizens look shallow and insensitive, and occluding moral and ethical issues which then cannot appear in the responses. Or perhaps that is not so surprising, considering that the secular cosmopolitans who dominate the communication trades, tend to view issues of morality as contaminated by religion, trying to impose its reactionary doctrines upon individual freedom.

But science, as expressed in its research models, has its own doctrines and which imply, among much else, an oblique ambivalence toward the assumptions underlying democratic governance. It also informs research into societal groupings, and the positivist orientation to them. As far back as the 1930's, researchers had been working out methods for population studies, urban planning and other interventions in the social economy. They had also been studying public opinion as related to voting behavior, and recognized the opportunities in applying their methods for business and government clients. Learning what millions of people felt about various candidates for political office, or about consumer goods, was attractive to those who could pay for it: once again, knowledge as power. In a time when corporate management was still skeptical about reliability of surveys, showing they could be managed as a scientific discipline was a strategy that was then, and continued to be, persuasive.

Inside the academy, however, science was divided into opposing camps, among which were the sociological and the psychological. Each claimed to present the fundamental analysis of social reality and causal explanation of activity there. Those conceptual oppositions are still visible, even though the materialist-positivist mentality upon which they were based is now obsolete. For the psychometric faction, the dominant school then was behaviorism, where mind was an illusion; the majority were infected with enthusiasm for its mechanistic, conditioned response model of quantified description, control and prediction. Very much in the air at the time were variants of S--->R learning theory which seemed so "scientific," an escape from all introspection and subjectivity. Countless laboratory studies, patiently conducted with caged rodents, or with student subjects (say, in recalling nonsense syllables), filled the journals for years with peer-reviewed (and now arcane) papers. From doing this work, certain habits of distance and didactic style were developed by academic psychologists -- lordly impressarios, presiding over stage-managed experiments with passive, confined or cognitively restricted subjects -- habits and attitudes to be carried into the construction of survey technology, where they continue to inform treatment of respondents and conditions of its practice.

For sociology, the foundational orientation from the start was an objectifying "science of society" along the lines set out by Auguste Comte over a century before, promising laws of collectivities would be discovered just as physical science had so conspicuously done for the material world. That anticipation eventually became professional creed, prevailing down through Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism. No laws, not even a paradigm were ever uncovered, but not to worry -- the borrowed prestige

and authority remained. So did the epistemic rule that groups, functioning as substantial wholes, are the prior reality, the basic phenomena to be investigated and explained. "Individuals" are only their products, moved about by exterior forces and factors against which internalized bundles of "motivations" struggled, a story still heard in junior college social studies classes . . . and in *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* explanations of survey numbers.

A breakthrough in the project to encompass the astronomical dimensions of the opinions of a national population came with refinement and utilization of statistical sampling procedures. The technique already had been shown to be efficient in biological research, as well as in manufacturing armaments, where a small number of items randomly selected could stand for much larger batches, within a definable accuracy of statistical probability. It came into general approval after the famously failed prediction from a mail-in poll conducted among the conservative subscribers of a well-known magazine that President Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 would not be re-elected. The built-in bias of the self-selected respondents was belatedly obvious and could be applied to other convenient practices, such as asking questions of people on a downtown street, or by going door to door in a suburb.

By conceptualizing opinion as residing in anonymous units of a population distributed across a landscape of census tracts, and severing their identification from possible self-selecting bias (e.g., being present on a street or living in a suburb), personal solicitation could be replaced by a mathematically random selection from name or location lists. With this method, the size of the sample is not what makes the study reliable; that depends instead on how fully randomized are the selections. Counter intuitively then, comparatively small numbers of people polled can be taken as projections of much larger populations. (Later, various adjustments for interpretive analysis were devised, by stratifying or clustering populations).

Statistical sampling methods represented a cognitive leap, yet despite their efficiency, they introduced continuing distortion. One source is found in the initial assumption that persons could be extracted from the dense settings in which they live in the same way a small sample of bolts can be picked out by randomizing formula, and inspected for compliance or variance with engineering design standards. Although all the bolts will be made of homogenous material (steel, not wood), persons differ significantly along many "dimensions." And while people's voting intentions are fairly straightforward and soon confirmed up or down, win or lose, that relative reliability cannot be generalized to other sorts of "opinion" on complex, many-sided issues.

Merely eliminating possible predisposition, or bias based on attributes (party affiliation, age cohort, etc.) and pre-empting connection between respondents, does not, however, make those selected "representative." Put differently, because a sample carefully avoids selecting interviewees on the basis of any personal characteristics or behavior, it does not correspondingly imply typicality. Randomizing does not equate with representativeness.

The lack of any partiality in selecting respondents does not imply those who are picked to answer may speak for all the rest of us, nor does it assure their views are in fact close to those of the many who were not selected and not asked. Polling consultants, of course, always claimed it did, and in the past half century, that dictum has become so taken for granted among the public and elites, that seeing through it requires something like a gestalt shift. (Galileo, *e.g.*, being able to see movement of a suspended weight as a pendulum when all his colleagues saw constrained fall).

A linguistic illusion is involved here. We have come to think of a *sample* as in itself a comprehensive mixture, as a "sampler" package of edible goods sold in a shop. But for persons, there remains immense diversity, of unspecified dimensions on which they differ, beyond arbitrary demographic markers: their personal traits, expectations based on experience, interests and purposes, biological heritage, cultural background, and much more, are mingled in endless combinations to form each particular individual, and become constitutive of who they consider themselves to be. Indeed, it is difficult to say what *representative* means in regard to persons, or to show the extent of the presumptive standing-for of a "representative" respondent, especially if he or she has no connection to the supposedly represented. Similarly, the term *cross-section* (meaning a diagrammatic view of an object) cannot directly apply to people. Instead of sample, therefore, a less misleading term would be assemblage, or better still, assortment.

Selecting isolated individuals to speak apart from their fellows can also produce distortions similar to the "one man, one vote" principle for electing legislative office holders. How so? Where a well-established majority can always win against a minority never large enough to elect a candidate of their own, the two-sided, winner-take-all system can lead to a minority's permanent disenfranchisement, and in turn, feed a hostile orientation, a politics of winners *vs.* excluded losers. Similarly, questions in polls tend to split issues into conventional partisan oppositions, and to funnel all diversity into either-or choices, while quite different understandings of the problem issue are filtered out and remain unheard. Examples of excluded middles are common -- and discouraging. Under the headline, "Poll: U.S. Should Be Peacekeeper," a recent newspaper report from the Associated Press went on to identify the source of this supposed conviction; "The Gallup Poll said 54 percent favored committing U.S. troops to the peacekeeping force, while 40 percent opposed it." What of all our other possibilities for that most complex situation in the Balkans? Joining those excluded ideas are excluded groups. Cultural and ethnic minorities, especially those located in neighborhoods and enclaves (Amish, Hmong, Orthodox Jews, Haitians, Iroquois, Catholic nuns, Lebanese, and so forth) may not be of sufficient numerical size to turn up in the survey sample, hence they cannot "vote" in a poll to represent their community of value and tradition. Even if one of them does get selected, his or her off-scale construals may not fit that of the question constructors; in any case, that one voice will be neutralized within the statistical computations.

By now, all those distortions have been obscured by habituation and the training of survey staffs. Publicity from agencies and institutions makes statistical reports familiar, and promotes their acceptance as accurate graphs and charts of almost any aspect of life. Opinion surveying is only one part of a much more extensive apparatus for creation, selection, and distribution of information, by which standardized methods of data collection and aggregation, facilitated by computer processing, are extended in every direction. But demographic statistics and markers put forward a picture of sameness, equivalence, and commonality in populations by the artifact of central tendency. Compressing, discarding, and blending data into ratings, weights, magnitudes, measures, scores, trend lines and ratios makes it easy for the public to disregard or forget the immense particularity and distinctiveness of persons. Qualitative differences either go uncollected, or are converted into numerical categories, into which each of us can be assigned a place.

As the methods and vocabulary of science are deployed from the academy and laboratory to colonize the lifeworld, they become accepted as the correct means for describing and defining official reality . . . eventually to be taken up by the courts, the schools, and public administration, in turn folded into legislation and legal precedent. Consciousness (or spirit) and life itself are moved within its scope, while aspects not available to observation or measuring from the outside are excluded. Now a moral and ethical crisis is presented by research on the human genome, a part of the larger project of molecular biology. Both strive to complete the hollowing out and thingifying of humans and other creatures. Not only does that work provide new possibilities for questionable interventions into human reproduction, it shows how the scientific establishment appropriates authority to define the nature of being -- the is-ness of living entities. Pragmatic naturalism justifies abhorrent practices, such as disposing down a laboratory sink surplus human embryos fertilized *in vitro*, when the inventory of the frozen others is large enough. After all, the explanation goes, their categorial identity is *only* 16 cells and *nothing more than* tissue. A last word from the final vocabulary.

Behind investigative procedures of the sciences, hard or social, lie three centuries of theory about correct knowledge, coming down from Descartes, Locke and Hume to mainstream mechanistic physics, experimental psychologies, and computer models of thinking, to form contemporary empiricism. Philosopher Charles Taylor renounces that epistemology as Hydra, "whose serpentine heads wreak havoc throughout the intellectual culture of modernity." He tries to overcome and get past it in a series of essays that follow upon his Sources of the Self. His wide-ranging analysis illuminates my own more limited interest here about the invasion and occupation of the public square by the polling industry.

Taylor discerns two images centered within the framing assumptions for empiricist acquisition of knowledge. One is of a disengaged, observing agent who sets aside his or her immersion in contextual backgrounds implied, for example, in any language of mutual intelligibility. This "punctual self" -- free-standing, distanced, self-inventing -- objectifies its own experiences as if it were a

disembodied subjectivity. Its disembedded, atomized data is used to compose collages or mosaics of representations through a computational input-output information processing. Rules for knowledge, according to this model, reductively fragment all unities, including the human, and suggest in turn, isolation and eventual solipsism.

More seriously, as he puts it, the disengaged perspective is now being ontologized into constituting the nature of mind. It can, in turn, be readily put in the service of ethically impoverished Utilitarian programs for extending control in all directions by instrumental reason. Practical, everyday uses in economic exchange and bureaucratic administration strengthen its hold on us, and comes to be seen as common sense, the way things get done.

This standard account of thinking and knowing -- of mind itself -- appears again in opinion surveying practice. Persons appearing on rosters are extracted as monads from their indigenous settings by anonymous investigators who ask precisely phrased questions formulated from unspoken interests. Whatever careful or careless answers they give, or would like to give to other questions not asked, only the smallest part of their saying -- words which correspond to the short menu of choices -- will be accepted, and everything else politely ignored. After they have their little say, incremental yeas and nays, agrees or disagrees, are summed to a composite number, data points on a linear scale, thereby becoming an opinion *of* the public. It is not seen as a fiction; in the empiricist construal, a number can acquire a reality of its own *because* it is a number; by naming and announcing, it is reified to a substantial entity out-there, like Comte's objectively existing "social fact."

The official "poverty line" is one of those reified numbers that has become so real that anyone "under" that line, stated as a dollar figure, is deemed to need help. Similarly, the concept of collective "public" opinion has become hardly thinkable without reference to a number, or string of numbers, an epistemic shift from which stems a general willingness not to inquire further as to what it is, or is not. Numbers have displaced the thing in itself. So construed, polling resembles paper-and-pencil testing of intelligence, a field where many researchers are content to define intelligence as "what I.Q. tests measure." Unfortunately, recognition of the superficiality and misuses of that extended effort, and the low esteem in which it is held by serious people, has not yet caught up with opinion polling.

Credibility of aggregated data about opinions across the nation depend on a simplistic notion: free-standing entities passively waiting out there for enumerators to collect and convert into sums. But holding to that line requires studied inattention to the transient and reticulated character of human thinking. *Opinions* are not well-bounded items we simply possess in an inventory, available for retrieval on cue. *Opinions* are not stored on shelves of a vast warehouse for compliant fetching and handing over. They are not dependably ripe, fully rounded ideas, awaiting the harvester. They can be elusive, and may not always be disclosed clearly and distinctly. And when an opinion is formally solicited, the questioner's question is translated, interpreted in terms of meanings



from a lifeworld in which the answerer is immersed; in effect, the question changes every time it is asked. In human exchange, moreover, words themselves do not stand singly and detached, as in dictionaries, but are containers for meanings drawn from wells of practices and everyday doing. Much more than direct and unequivocal pointing, talking in words is often freighted with hard-to-say experience, and sometimes, the impulse not to say. Or the opposite: instead of fullness of meaning, talk can be empty filler, comfortable blah-blah and getting by. In "Fragment of An Agon," T. S. Eliot parodied the difficulty of speech: *I gotta use words when I talk to you . . .*

Polling surveys convey an image of politics as a presented buffet, a menu of individual choices to be routinely scanned for selection by citizens, without having an opportunity beforehand to identify their concerns and to deliberate publicly about them. Their averaged-out responses to questions on complex national issues will appear hasty or superficial because they have not had available the grounds of exchange -- as elites routinely do -- where contrasting views can be mutually examined. Nor do ordinary citizens have realistic opportunities for exchange with elites. As a result, leveled-down numbers supposedly representing popular views, are too often heard by the upper tiers as uninformed and showing limited comprehension, hence easily discredited. But even when not, polls fail to provide citizens direct access to their stewards, in their own words, without intermediaries or instruments.

In contrast to the artifice of written-down questions and answer codes which restrict and truncate an informant's response, ordinary conversation among people in their own settings is more enabling of ample, candid disclosure, of openings for expressing vernacular understandings commonly shared with those one lives among, convenes with, learns from. They can be as much a process as product, both emergent and formed in dialogical spaces between persons. Top management of the survey industry knows all this, but says almost nothing to us. No need to; as a quasi-official arm of modern government, with staffs recruited from the same technocratic elite, it remains beyond the reach of citizen complaint or critique. To any dissent, it just plays back the standard account, while promoting fantasies among media audiences about technologies for penetrating quickly and definitively into our mentalities, meanings, valuings, dissemblings. What recourse then?

Accurate measuring of a transient entity called national opinion requires of its audience a suspension of doubt, a credulity not wholly different from that afforded celebrities by loyal fans, wanting to believe and denying all skepticism. Churlish, then, to try to unmask celebrityness as surface escaped from substance, without appreciating the emptiness it seems to assuage, or without useful ideas about what can be put in its place. Will those who comprise the cheering crowds needed to sustain elevated status, be able to see themselves as diminished within the ranks, pacified ciphers in a publicity apparatus serving the celebrity game? Who has the heart to tell them?

The influence and established position of the opinion marketing business should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, as a great man once said, "The voice

of reason is low, but it is persistent." It may not be too much to hope therefore that the good people out in the counties, boroughs, and parishes, will come to recognize a pollster's glancing contact not as a true opportunity to be heard, but as another reminder of their routine exclusion from civic conversations that count. Or suppose they were helped to see that being called by survey corporations was really an occasion for being used -- and for free -- by distant hierarchies they will never speak to directly, anymore than to glittering Stars? Instead of being flattered by the invitation to answer a few questions in even fewer words, might they then politely refuse to participate? One could raise a cheer for that, but what might the country's political life be like without that omniscient voice telling us what we think?

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