



News Release

For Immediate Release
June 28, 2001

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PUBLIC HAS DOUBTS ABOUT WHETHER POLLS REALLY REPRESENT THEIR VIEWS

*Policy Leaders and Journalists More Likely Than Public to
Think Polls Give the Public a Voice in Policymaking*

Menlo Park, California – Three companion surveys by the Kaiser Family Foundation, conducted in collaboration with *Public Perspective* magazine, give new insight into how the public, policy leaders and media professionals view public opinion polls. The surveys show that while policy leaders and journalists see polls as an effective tool for giving the public a voice in the policymaking process, the public itself is more skeptical. The polls are featured in the July/August 2001 issue of *Public Perspective* along with expert commentary on the subject.

The surveys of the public, policy leaders and journalists find the public has the least confidence in polls, with one-third (33%) believing that, in general, polls accurately reflect what the public thinks. In contrast, 53% of journalists believe that polls reflect what the public thinks most of the time, while policy leaders fall in between at 41%. More journalists (44%) said they consulted polls in their jobs than policy leaders (19%).

When asked what is the best way for policymakers to learn what the majority of people think about important issues, 43% of the public chooses town hall meetings, while one in four choose polls. Policy leaders and journalists think the reverse: 46% of policy leaders and 52% of journalists say polls are the best way, while 31% of policy leaders and 25% of journalists say town hall meetings. However, when asked if government officials should pay attention to polls when making decisions about important issues, 75% of the public says they should (36% say “a great deal” and 39% say “a fair amount”).

The survey also found that the public has difficulty distinguishing between scientific and non-scientific polls and is the least informed about how polling works. For example, when asked if it was important, in comparing two polls, that one poll selected people to be interviewed by randomly calling telephone numbers, while another was based on people who responded to an 800 number advertised on TV, 37% of the public think this is a very important distinction. Eighty percent (80%) of policy leaders and 89% of journalists think it is.

“The challenge for pollsters is that the public sees polls more as a way to spin and sell than as a way to give people a voice in national affairs,” said Drew E. Altman, Ph.D., President of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Other key findings:

- A large majority (80%) of the public believes that the questions asked in polls often don’t give people the opportunity to say what they really think about an issue. Policy leaders (92%) and journalists (88%) share this view.

(more)

- When asked about how big a role polls play at different stages in the policy process, journalists and policy leaders are closely aligned. Both groups are more likely to say that polls play a “very big role” in shaping communication campaigns about new policies (41% policy leaders, 46% journalists) than in shaping public policy agendas (28%, 29%) or public policies themselves (16%, 20%). (Note that this question was asked only of policy leaders and journalists.)
- Two-thirds (66%) of the public questions the usefulness of polls because polls “can be twisted to say whatever you want them to say.”
- When asked about how much attention policymakers should pay to public opinion polls on a range of issues, the public is most likely to say that policymakers should pay a great deal of attention to polls on health care and education issues (56% and 57%) and least likely to say they should pay attention to polls on foreign policy issues (38%).
- Journalists have the most confidence in their ability to tell if polls are conducted in a fair and scientific manner, with 70% responding that they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence. Forty-nine percent (49%) of the public and 42% of policy leaders feel as confident in their own ability to judge a poll’s validity.

Despite varying degrees of cynicism and sophistication, all three groups see value in polling. Eighty-four percent (84%) of the public, 78% of policy leaders and 90% of journalists agree with the following statement: “Public opinion polling is far from perfect, but it is one of the best means we have for communicating what the public is thinking.”

The discussions of the surveys in *Public Perspective* also explore the extent to which the public feels it actually has input in the policymaking process. The differences among the three groups in terms of their perceptions of the influence the public has on policymaking and how well policymakers understand the views of the public are notable.

Methodology

The Kaiser Family Foundation national surveys of the Role of Polls in Policymaking were designed and analyzed by staff at the Kaiser Family Foundation, *Public Perspective* and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), and the fieldwork was carried out by PSRA on behalf of Kaiser. Fieldwork for the survey of the general public was conducted by telephone between January 3 and March 26, 2001. The sample consisted of 1,206 randomly selected, nationally representative English-speaking adults 18 and older.

Fieldwork for the surveys of policy leaders and journalists was conducted by PSRA between December 21, 2000 and March 30, 2001. Interviews were conducted with 300 policymakers from six different areas: senior executive branch officials, members of Congress, senior Congressional staff, think tank scholars, lobbyists and trade association executives. Interviews were conducted with 301 media professionals, including professionals from top newspapers, TV and radio networks, news services and news magazines.

For results based on the public sample, the margin of error is within plus or minus 3 percentage points. For results based on the policy leader and media professional samples, the margin of error is +/-6 percentage points. Note that in addition to sampling error there are other possible sources of measurement error.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a nonprofit, independent national health care philanthropy and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

Copies of the survey topline and chartpack (publication #3146) are available online at www.kff.org, or by calling the Foundation’s Publication Request Line at 1-800-656-4533.

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