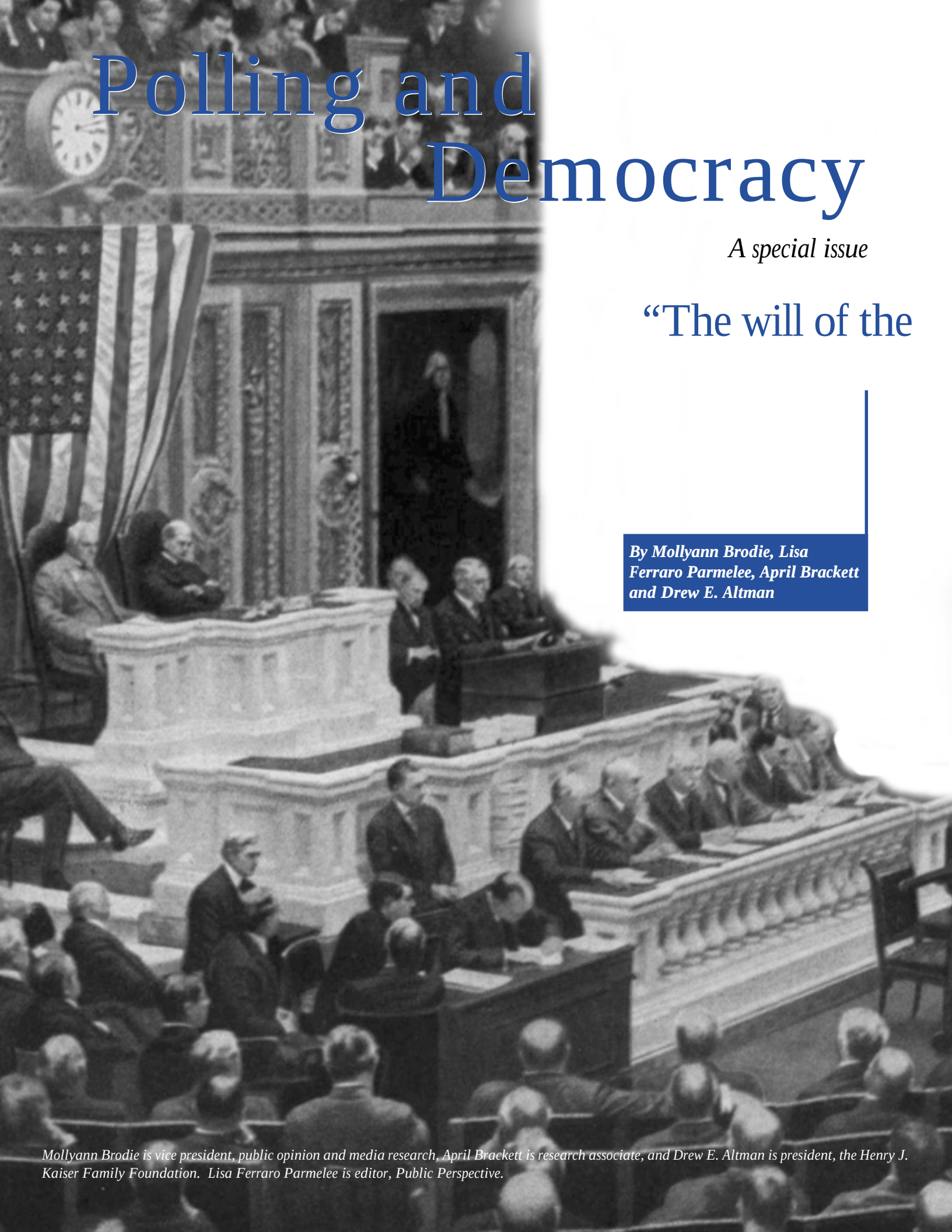
# Polling and Democracy

*A special issue*

## "The will of the

**By Mollyann Brodie, Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, April Brackett and Drew E. Altman**



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# people,"

wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1801, "is the only legitimate foundation of any government." From our earliest schooldays, Americans are taught to hold this truth to be self-evident. We are taught that the bedrock of our democratic republic is the ability of our elected officials to carry out the will of the people.

Earlier this year, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, in collaboration with *Public Perspective* magazine, set out to explore Americans' opinions about public opinion polling, to see whether polls are regarded as an effective instrument for expressing the people's will to leaders in government.

Survey researchers have long been interested in asking the public what they know and think about polling. Michael W. Traugott and Mee-Eun Kang write that in 1944, when E. Goldman conducted the first national "poll on polls," his survey showed that more than half of the respondents knew about polls, that about one-quarter followed polls either regularly or occasionally, and "that the public was generally confident that polls had a positive impact on politics." By 1985, the percentage responding positively in their assessments of polls had grown to 76%, and by 1996 it was 87%.

Over this time of increasing interest in polls, pollsters have focused mainly on public attention to and assessment of election polls and their potential bearing on a democracy; indeed, the number of questions asked on voting and electoral politics has increased every election year.

The Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey sought to focus more explicitly on the role of polls in policymaking. What role does the public think polls should and do play in policymaking? What are Americans' views on the role polls can and do play in communicating their policy preferences to the policymakers? How do their views compare to those of policy leaders and the media?

The survey was designed and analyzed by staff at Kaiser, *Public Perspective* and Princeton Survey Research Associates, and the field work was carried out by PSRA on behalf of Kaiser. From January 3, 2001 through March 26, 2001, telephone interviews were conducted with a nationally representative random sample of 1,206 adults.

The study included companion surveys conducted with a random sample of national policymakers and policy influentials—here referred to as policy leaders—and with a random sample of journalists. The policy leader sample included 300 senior executive branch officials, senior congressional staff members, think tank scholars, lobbyists, trade association executives, and two members of Congress. They were interviewed December 21, 2000 through March 30, 2001.

The 301 journalists included media professionals at the top 50 circulation daily newspapers, major television networks' news divisions, major radio networks' news divisions, major news services and major news magazines. Interviews with them also took place December 21, 2000 through March 30, 2001.

In the pages of special coverage that follow, we present the results of this survey. We also present discussion of the results from the varying perspectives of notable professionals from those groups for whom the findings carry the most relevance.

Evans Witt, president of PSRA, discusses the implications of the results for members of the polling community. Thomas B. Edsall, who covers national politics for the *Washington Post*, looks at them from a journalist's point of view. And Bill McInturff and Lori Weigel, partners at the political polling firm of Public Opinion Strategies, talk about what the results might mean for the policymakers themselves.

So what does the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey tell us about Americans' perceptions of their role and the role of polls in shaping national policy?

First, Americans think they should and can participate in policymaking. Just over half the survey respondents said they were confident in the public as a whole when it comes to making judgments about the general direction elected

and government officials should take on the various issues facing the nation. While policy leaders' overall level of confidence is similar, the media place even more faith in the public. Confidence in public judgment increases even further among Americans when they are asked about specific areas of policymaking, such as the economy, education, and health issues.

Furthermore, the principle of majority rule is one that is taken almost universally to heart by the public, with 94% saying the views of the majority of Americans should have a great deal or a fair amount of influence on the decisions of elected and government officials in Washington.

In fact, the public's belief in this basic tenet of democracy is so strong that more than half think elected officials should go against their own knowledge and judgment in favor of what the majority wants. Four in ten respondents still favored following the majority even when it was pointed out that historically there have been instances—such as in the case of racial segregation—when the majority has later been judged to be egregiously in the wrong (see Figure 1).

And herein lie several of the most provocative findings of the survey. First, the intensity of the people's belief in the primacy of majority rule in policymaking is not matched by either policy leaders or the media; where 68% of the public said the views of the majority should have a great deal of influence on policy, 25 percentage points fewer among the other two groups thought the same.

Second, the public wants policymakers both to follow the will of the majority and to rely on their own judgment and knowledge. What is a policymaker to do when those two sources suggest different directions?

Also notable are the differences among the groups in terms of their perceptions of the influence the majority actually has on policymaking. Why do nearly half of the people see their own influence on decisions made in Washington as negligible when so many policy leaders think the views of the majority have a great deal or a fair amount of influence? Why do 72% of policy leaders believe that officials who go against the wishes of the majority are doing what they think is in the best interest of the public while less than half the public thinks so?

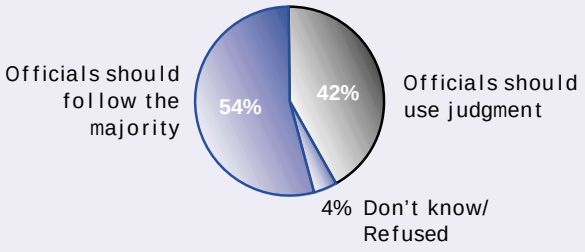
*Figure 1*

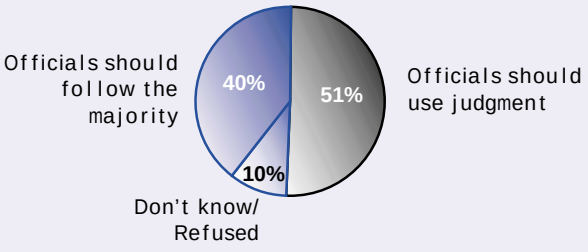
## Majority Rule in a Representative Democracy

**Question**: ...Please tell me which [statement] comes closer to your views.... [E]lected and government officials should use their knowledge and judgment to make decisions about what is the best policy to pursue even if this goes against what the majority of the public wants. ...[E]lected and government officials should follow what the majority wants, even if it goes against the officials' knowledge and judgment.

**Question**: At times in the past, the majority of Americans have held positions later judged to be wrong, such as in their support of racial segregation of blacks and whites. Do you think officials in Washington should do what the majority wants because the majority is usually right, or should officials rely on their knowledge and judgment when they think the majority is wrong?

*Public responses*




**Source**: Survey by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, in collaboration with *Public Perspective*, January 3-March 26, 2001.

Most fundamentally, what does it mean that 85 to 90% of policy leaders and media professionals claim to understand very or somewhat well what the public thinks about the issues facing the nation, while only 49% of Americans think they are being this well understood?

Clearly, something is missing in the discourse between the people and their leaders. That something may well be a means by which the former can effectively communicate their views to the latter. Is that means public opinion polling?

Polling professionals hold that their work, when conducted properly, yields remarkably accurate analyses of the political and social attitudes of the nation. The Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey shows that those who rely on polls the most—the media and policy leaders—tend to concur. Fifty-two percent of the media and 46% of policy leaders named polls as the best way for officials to learn what the majority of people in our country think about important issues, preferring them over town hall meetings, talking to people on the street, and talking to people who call.

The people themselves, however, have less clarity about the value of polling as a means of communicating their views to their leaders. While most think polls are useful to help policymakers understand the public's views, only a quarter said they see them as the best means—43% favored town hall meetings. The public tends to place polls in the middle of the list of ways in which officials can and should find out what's on Americans' minds.

The reason is that Americans view public opinion polls with a dubious eye. Majorities of the public think that polls are inaccurate, have inherent limitations that prevent them from communicating the public's views, and are subject to manipulation. While half believe that they are based on sound scientific practices, half disagree or are not sure about the validity of the polling process.

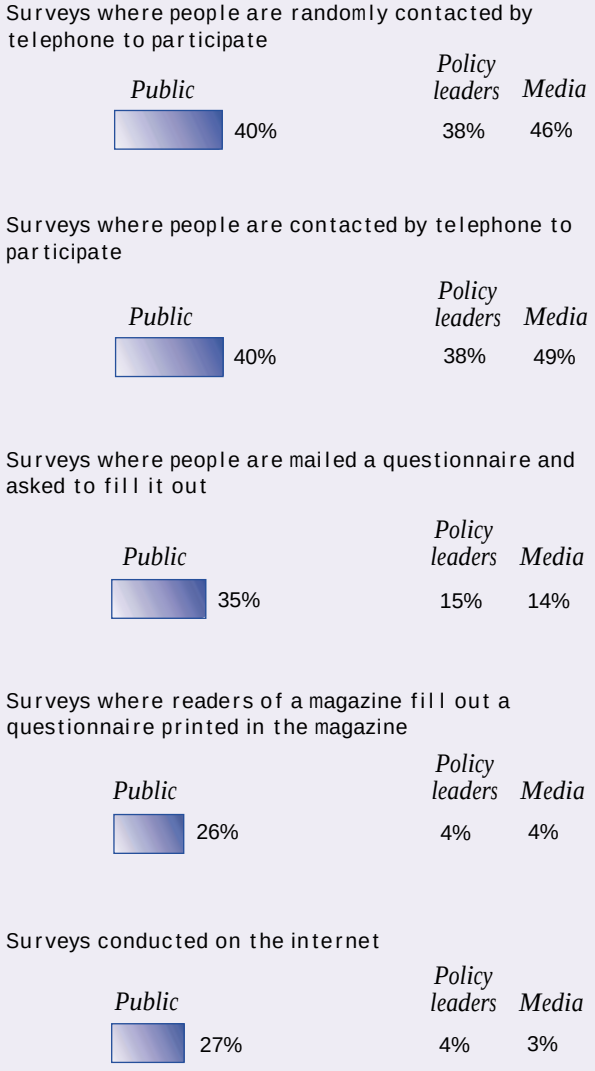
It is difficult to ascertain where this distrust comes from, but some insights are afforded by responses to the questions about the practice of polling itself. More than half believe that surveys conducted with a randomly selected group of people rarely represent the public's view. And fewer than 4 in 10 recognize that selecting people at random, rather than relying on self-selected samples such as an 800 call-in number, is a very important difference in making the poll better. (Policy

*Figure 2*

## Distinctions Among Survey Methods

**Question**: In your opinion, how often do... accurately reflect what the public thinks...?

*Percent responding just about always or most of the time*




**Source**: Survey by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, in collaboration with *Public Perspective*, January 3-March 26, 2001.

leaders and the media are considerably more likely to recognize the differences in various approaches.) Just over half of the public said they pay attention to who conducted or sponsored a poll, as opposed to nearly nine out of ten policy leaders and almost all of the media.

In short, a pretty sizeable segment of the public lacks the knowledge and awareness of polling and polling practices to understand clearly what polling has to tell them, how to distinguish between "good" and "bad" polls, or how useful polls can be for communicating the people's will.

Many Americans recognize their own limitations in dealing intelligently with polls—half of those in the survey had little or no confidence in their ability to judge whether a particular survey was carried out in a fair and scientific manner. This recognition means the public knows it is at a disadvantage in evaluating the accuracy of a given poll, or determining if it is being put to appropriate use, thus possibly rendering polls less reliable in the public's eyes.

Even more powerful is the public's cynicism regarding the reasons their elected officials employ polls. Although nearly two-thirds agreed that policymakers consult polls because they believe the public should have a say in what government does, fully 83% said the main reason is that the officials want to stay popular and get re-elected.

Rather than being seen exclusively as the instrument of good government they might be, polls are also viewed as a device politicians can use to further their own ends. (Policy leaders themselves claimed in the survey that they hardly ever consult polls; they were also the most likely of the three groups surveyed to agree that the results of polls can be twisted to say whatever you want them to say.)

In the final analysis, the American people want to believe in public opinion polling, and to take advantage of it as an instrument for expressing their will. When asked if polling, while far from perfect, is one of the best means we have for communicating what the public is thinking, 84%—and comparable proportions of policy leaders and the media—agreed that it is.

It seems clear, based on the results of the Kaiser/*Public Perspective* survey, that the challenge to pollsters is to resolve this conflict between the role polling at its best can play in the democratic process and Americans' lack of confidence in their own ability to assess the value of polls and thus feel secure in placing their trust in them.

The public's lack of knowledge about polls, combined with concerns about manipulation and their inherent limitations, creates an environment in which the public will question even the best-executed polls. Unless the polling community finds a way to educate the public, and those who help interpret poll results for the public, about "good" and "bad" polls and polling techniques—including offering candid insight into the limitations of polls in representing the public's views—survey researchers will continue to face hurdles in explaining why their data should be taken seriously in the policy process.

Data follow on pages 16-24