

# Heard Enough

*When is an opinion really an opinion?*

By John M. Benson

*Editor's note: In this issue of Public Perspective we introduce "Experiments," a new section of From the Field devoted to describing and evaluating innovative approaches to solving methodological problems in polling.*

During policy debates, polls often ask the public whether they favor or oppose particular policy options. In cases where the debate has been going on for some time and Americans have had the opportunity and interest to think about the consequences of various options, polls usually deliver stable and consistent results reflecting mature judgments. On other occasions, when for whatever reason people have not yet thought much about an issue or option, polls can yield misleading or inconsistent results.

Looking solely at favor/oppose questions asked in 2000 and 2001 about school vouchers and charter schools, one might conclude that Americans have firm opinions about these two issues. The volunteered "don't know" response has never exceeded 6% for vouchers, or 14% for charter schools.

But an experiment in a June to July 1999 survey by National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government paints a different picture. Half of the respondents were asked standard favor/oppose questions about school vouchers and charter schools. The other half received parallel questions with the added phrase,

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"...or haven't you heard enough about that to have an opinion?"

In the case of vouchers, the 4% volunteered "don't know" response ballooned into a 33% explicit "haven't heard enough." But the charter school results were even more striking. While only 9% volunteered "don't know" in the standard favor/oppose version, 63% in the other form said they had not heard enough to have an opinion. Given the latter choice, the proportion favoring charter schools plunged from 62% to 25%, presenting policymakers with two completely different pictures of the public's views.

This experiment is not the only evidence that Americans have not yet come to judgment about vouchers or charter schools. When asked in a May 2000 *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* survey if they knew what the term "school voucher" meant, 44% of registered voters said they did not. In a 1999 Public Agenda/Charles A. Dana Foundation survey, 63% of Americans said they knew very little or nothing at all about school vouchers and how they work.

About half (51%) of respondents in the 2000 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup survey said they had not heard or read about charter schools. Similarly, 51% of registered voters in the *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* survey said they did not know what the term meant. More than three-fourths (81%) of Americans said in the Public Agenda/Dana Foundation survey that they knew very little or nothing at all about charter schools and how they work.

These examples provide a caution that questions intended to measure attitudes may sometimes end up measuring "non-attitudes," a term coined by Philip E.

Converse in 1964, or "pseudo-opinions," as described by George Bishop et al. in 1980. Rather than admitting that they don't know the answer to a question on a topic they have thought little about, some people generate responses on the spot that may not be well-considered opinions.

In *Coming to Public Judgment*, Daniel Yankelovich outlined a seven-step "Public Judgment" model by which people move from having "raw opinions"—uninformed, volatile, sometimes self-contradictory—to firm, stable, and internally consistent opinions. During



the past few years, the public has become increasingly concerned about problems with the nation's public schools, has felt an urgency to try to solve the problems, and has begun to cast about for solutions. But in the case of vouchers and charter schools, many Americans do not yet have enough information to form firm opinions.

It is also possible that some large portion of the public does not see either of these options as addressing the main problems of public schools, especially behavioral problems, so they do not devote as much attention to them as some policy experts might prefer.

In early stages in the evolution of public judgment, responses are particularly susceptible to question wording, because the respondent is often learning about an issue from cues in the question itself. Moreover, respondents often back away from their initial support for a proposal when tradeoffs or counter-arguments are presented. The former seems to be the case when it comes to charter schools. Depending on the question wording, support in favor/oppose questions ranges from 47 to 70%. Follow-up questions challenging favorable responses about school vouchers sometimes lower support to less than half its initial level.

Perhaps equally important, parents of school-age children do not seem to have opinions that are any firmer than other Americans. For instance, 35% of parents say they haven't heard enough about vouchers to have an opinion, and 65% haven't heard enough about charter schools.

None of this is meant to say that the media and survey organizations should not ask questions about new or difficult subjects. But we should take precautions to make sure we do not report misleading results. Several survey organizations have tried to deal with this problem in different ways. The NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll crafts single questions that present carefully balanced pro and con arguments reflecting the main policy arguments, in the process supplying information that the respondent may not have known.

Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser argued in *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys* that respondents should be allowed or encouraged to see "don't know" as a legitimate response. Gallup tends to ask separate "heard/read" questions as an indicator of respondent knowledge or attention; such questions are also useful in crosstabs to measure the opinions of those who

describe themselves as knowing about the issue or term. Still other organizations use "haven't heard enough to have an opinion," at least in a split-form comparison with the standard favor/oppose question.

"Heard/read" questions, if not taken too literally, and "haven't heard enough" options are useful in early stages of a policy debate. Aside from journalists' desire to declare definitively "what the American people think," the main drawback is that some commentator is almost certain to say that large "haven't heard enough" results prove Americans are ignorant.

As a profession, we should emphasize the learning curve on policy questions. Real people have more important things to think about in their daily lives than charter schools, unless that issue directly affects them or becomes an important part of a larger political or ideological debate.

Another defense against misleading conclusions is to ask a series of questions measuring different aspects of the issue. The pluralism of the polling field can also help: different organizations ask questions in different ways, providing natural experiments for researchers.

The high degree of sensitivity to question wording in the early stages is not all bad. There is no harm in asking questions on topics people know little about, so long as we don't take responses to a single question as gospel. We could tut-tut the various parties for publishing non-attitudes, but the wide range of responses can actually be instructive in

a practical sense. We can see how particular phrases in a question wording move people, which in turn gives us insight into the values and thought processes respondents are likely to bring to the issue once they start to pay closer attention. Trying different phrases can also serve as a form of message testing.

Even when people do not have detailed programmatic knowledge

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about particular policy proposals, they often have values that they bring to bear when considering unfamiliar options. Such initial responses may not be the mature judgments of the Yankelovich model, but they do represent a tentative evaluation that may sometimes indicate the broad outline firmer opinions will take later on. In *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, John Zaller took a middle position on non-attitudes, rejecting the idea that most response fluctuation is due to random guessing by people who have no meaningful opinions. All responses are meaningful but tentative, and some are more tentative than others.

But it is clear that when it comes to issues or policies where one- to two-thirds of respondents, given the chance, report they do not feel informed, we should be careful not to trumpet these tentative evaluations as the public's final answer on the subject. The survey experiments described here make it clear that a large proportion of the American public has not yet made up its mind about school vouchers and charter schools. ●