

WHO SAYS AMERICANS ARE “MAD AS HELL”?

By Everett C. Ladd

A prominent reporter for a large national daily told me a few weeks ago of his distress over the media's handling of what has become the big story of Campaign '92—"The Angry American Voter." As an example of what was troubling him, he related a recent conversation he had with a fellow journalist employed by a major California paper.

The reporter had been assigned to write a big piece on how angry his state's voters' rebellious mood was, as part of his paper's coverage of the June 9 California presidential primary. He had personally interviewed a couple score of rank-and-file state residents, and had then filed his account. Upon reading the piece, his editor told him that he must interview more people—because those he had reached in the first round weren't really angry!

How did the editor "know" that Californians were in fact "mad as hell," and that his reporter had blown it by locating a group of interviewees who somehow didn't fit the prevailing pattern? I don't know, of course, but he might fairly claim that the polls told him so.

Many survey analysts have made this argument in recent months. They cite findings such as those of a June Gallup survey in which only 14% of respondents said they were satisfied "with the way things are going in the United States at this time." This was the second lowest proportion ever recorded in more than 40 askings of the question over the last 13 years. A number of other, related measures, some of which we chart in this issue's Public Opinion Report, show the same pattern of response. In the lead article, Humphrey Taylor ably states the case for the "deep anger" interpretation and reviews supporting data.

The Question of Intensity Has Been Largely Ignored

Now, there's no debate over the fact that a number of questions asking people whether they like the way things are going in the nation have been getting very negative responses of late. At doubt are the sources and significance of these findings. I would insist, for example, that the type of question cited is by itself wholly incapable of telling us what we need to know because it measures only the *direction of opinion* and ignores the more politically important element of its *intensity*.

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100. Who would claim that a situation in which 70% of the public say they are dissatisfied, with an average intensity of 7, is anything comparable to one where 70% are dissatisfied, with an average intensity rating of 87? The former would be the lightest of moods, easily swept away by a modest dose of good news. The latter would mean system-shaking anger.

We don't have such a precise measure of intensity, of course. But I would argue that the composite of available information—including, but not limited to, poll data—suggests that the nation as a whole is far closer to the hypothetical average 7 than to 87.

The Extreme Volatility Indicates Superficiality

The extreme volatility in response direction on the "satisfied/dissatisfied?" questions supports my argument. Many of these questions recorded near-record highs of satisfaction in the spring of 1991 and near-record lows this spring. For example, 66% of those interviewed by Gallup in March 1991 said they were satisfied with "the way things are going in the United States at this time," the highest figure recorded in more than 40 askings of the question over 13 years. (Sixty-six percent also came down satisfied in a March 1986 survey.) The 14% who said they were satisfied in June of this year was the second lowest ever recorded; the absolute lowest number, 12% satisfied, came from a survey taken in July 1979, in the setting which prompted Jimmy Carter's famous speech on American malaise.

Similarly, in June 1991 just 34% agreed that "things in this country have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track (Los Angeles Times survey). Just 10 months later, however, a near-record high of 81% said we were on the wrong track (ABC News survey).

The conclusion of the Gulf War was dominating the headlines in the spring of last year, of course, and that experience now belongs to the past. But this aside, little has changed in the nation's position, and much of what has changed is for the better. For example, the security of the US internationally has been further enhanced by events of the last year; changes in the policies and politics of our former adversaries have on the whole been to our liking. On the domestic side, no one questions that the US economy has strengthened from the recession-low of spring 1991.

When against this backdrop, a series of measures purport to show a swing from great optimism to bleak pessimism, they must be tapping something pretty close to the surface.

Another View: Some Real Problems...

Let's for a moment at least table the "people are really angry" hypothesis and explore another interpretation of the nation's mood. In this view, Americans have, as they very often do, decidedly mixed assessments of overall conditions: They see bright spots and areas of concern. The economy, which went roughly two years (early 1990 through early 1992) without real growth overall has been politically the most important concern; its performance clearly weakened the incumbent President's political position.

Still, by itself the economic downturn was not severe enough to produce such a big swing in the confidence measures. As Humphrey Taylor observes, the recession if long was shallow. Witness the fact that unemployment has now reached the comparatively low point of 7.5%; for perspective, it was 7.7% in April 1984, when the Reagan administration was basking in what was seen as a generally favorable economic climate.

...And a Dollop of Media Negativism

In the interview which follows this piece, political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset argues that the role of the media must be factored in if we are to understand why various satisfaction and confidence measures dropped so sharply in a relatively mild economic downturn. This

recession was unusual, he argues, in that the media themselves were affected: "A lot of people working in television and newspapers were laid off or feared being laid off, and because of this the media treated this recession as worse than previous ones (p. 10)." In general, Lipset continues, "the media have a pivotal role in shaping the nation's mood. They tell vast numbers of people that things are as bad now economically as they've been in decades, and then they channel the discontent this produces at the politicians....."

A Different Story When Personal Observation Comes Into Play

I agree with Lipset that the "problems, problems" drumbeat which in recent months has again been predominant in much of the national news media, especially television, where most Americans now turn for news, is much implicated in the marked drop many satisfaction measures have shown. But I would also argue that the media's role accounts for the relative superficiality of the decline, and for the marked dichotomy in responses one sees across the battery of mood questions.

As we show in the Public Opinion Report, when asked about things they know about through first-hand experience—how they themselves are doing economically, their satisfaction with the work they do, how things are going in their own communities, etc.—Americans appear anything but negative and pessimistic. For the most part, the data show, it's only when questions focus on things that people can't assess from personal observation and must rely on the pictures

which the media supplies, that a marked downturn in mood in recent months is evident.

The persistence of this sharp dichotomy in response is striking. How is the country doing economically? Badly. How about your own financial situation? It's pretty good. How are public schools performing nationally? Only 21% in a March 1991 Gallup poll gave them grades of A or B. Well, how are the schools your children attend performing? Seventy-three percent graded them A or B.

Thus is the media-encouraged negativism of the public's view of national direction mitigated by the relatively positive assessments Americans give of their personal situation and of developments in their own communities, where they have personal knowledge.

Given all this, the US public has come to a mixed and ambivalent assessment of the overall state of affairs. Many people are more confused and groping than "really mad." It's not surprising, then, that millions of voters have, in effect, told pollsters when asked about their vote intent, "I'm still shopping." For a time candidates like Pat Buchanan, Paul Tsongas, and Jerry Brown were the outlets for this stance; in the last few months, Ross Perot has been the vehicle.

The electorate at large will have the final say on November 3. But my reading of what it has been saying is that, while far from euphoric about the nation's direction, it is equally far from being deeply troubled and angry. It's still in a mood for straight talk and sober assessment.

Everett C. Ladd is professor of political science, and executive director and president, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut