

INDIVIDUAL IGNORANCE AND COLLECTIVE WISDOM

By Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro

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A typical individual's policy preferences, it seems fair to assume, are neither perfectly informed and fixed nor totally uninformed and random. Instead, they are based on some fundamental needs and values that are relatively enduring; on some uncertain beliefs concerning how public policies relate to those needs and values; and on some incomplete fragments of information that tend on the whole—though not, perhaps, with total consistency—to support those beliefs.

If this is so—if citizens' preferences are dependent upon uncertain beliefs, bolstered by incomplete bits of information—then new information or arguments that bear upon beliefs about policy alternatives can change people's policy preferences. Mass media stories bearing on who is responsible for a problem, for example, may affect citizens' attributions of responsibility, thereby altering their preferences.

Thus pieces of new information, some enduring but some transient and quickly contradicted, may push an individual's preferences back and forth in a seemingly random fashion, so that he or she may give fluctuating survey responses of the sort that have been interpreted as revealing "nonattitudes." Similar fluctuations in expressed opinions can result if an individual is ambivalent about a given policy and entertains a set of conflicting considerations, perhaps randomly choosing one, in "top of the head" fashion, under the pressure of the interview situation. Shifting responses can also result from various sources of measurement error.

Yet it is also consistent with this picture that at any given moment an individual has real policy preferences, based

on underlying needs and values and on the beliefs held at that moment. Furthermore, over a period of time, each individual has a central tendency of opinion, which might be called a "true" or *long-term preference*, and which can be ascertained by averaging the opinions expressed by the *same individual* at several different times. If the individual's opinions fluctuate randomly around the same central tendency for a sustained period of time, his or her true long-term preferences will be stable and ascertainable, despite observed momentary fluctuations in opinion.

If this picture of individuals' opinions is correct, then at any given moment the public as a whole also has real *collective* policy preferences, as defined by any of various aggregation rules: majority-preferred policy choices (if such exist), or average positions on attitude scales, or proportions of the public choosing particular policy alternatives over others....

Moreover—and this is the key point—at any given moment, the random deviations of individuals from their long-term opinions may well cancel out over a large sample, so that a poll or survey can accurately measure collective preferences as defined in terms of the true or long-term preferences of many individual citizens. As a result, the measurement of collective public opinion is largely free of the random error associated with individual attitudes. Further, if the true (long-term) opinions of individuals remain fairly stable over a lengthy period of time—or if they change in offsetting ways—collective public opinion as measured by surveys will be stable, quite unlike the fluctuating individual opinions and responses that make it up.

More generally, if individuals' real opinions, or measurements of those opinions, are subject to *any* sort of random variation...then simple statistical reasoning indicates that those errors will tend to cancel each other out when the opinions of individuals are aggregated. Collective measurements—averages (means or medians), majority or plurality choices, marginal frequencies of responses—will tend accurately to reflect the "true" underlying or long-term opinions of the individuals.

That is to say, even if individual opinions or survey responses are ill-informed, shallow, and fluctuating, collective opinion can be real, highly stable, and, as we will see, based on all the available information; and it can be measured with considerable accuracy by standard survey techniques. *If* the available information is accurate and helpful (which depends upon the nature of a society's information system), collective opinion can even be wise....

[T]here are many ways in which individual (and collective) opinion could respond to new, policy-relevant information, which we see as a central aspect of collective rationality. It is possible—though we doubt it often happens—that individuals make elaborate cost-benefit calculations on their own each time new information is available. More likely, responsiveness to new information results from individuals using cognitive shortcuts or rules of thumb, such as reliance upon trusted delegates or reference figures (friends, interest groups, experts, political leaders) to do political reasoning for them and to provide guidance. If such cue givers are available and reliable, people may be able to form or adjust their opinions sensibly without elaborate instrumental calculations.