OPINION POLLS IN A DEMOCRACY (CASE)

Public opinion polls are an important form of public input into political decision making. There is some controversy about the role polls (also called surveys) should play in a democracy. A real plus is that polling is a more direct way for the public to express policy preferences than is going through elected representatives whose job is to filter, interpret, bundle, and sometimes ignore citizens’ views. A negative is that polling bypasses deliberation, bargaining, and other important features of decision making.

Many polls do not try to uncover how important the views are to the respondents and whether they are likely to follow through with political action. Because expressing an opinion is easier than acting on it, decision makers may give more weight to constituents concerned enough to communicate directly, lobby, and vote.

Because polls both report and shape public opinion, they should be used carefully. Survey results may be ambiguous and inconsistent; sometimes they are not highly credible and not specific enough to guide policy making. They also are subject to cherry-picking, when advocates search for polls that support their political position and their opponents do the same.

Public leaders know that public opinion changes in response to changing circumstances. Media exposure, the availability of new information, the calming effect of passing time, and other factors affect the public’s judgments. Perhaps a new crisis pushes an earlier concern off the radar screen. This is reassuring because it means that many in “the public” are flexible, not dogmatic, and have the capacity to learn. Because public opinion can and does change, “snapshot” surveys
taken only once are less useful than when the questions are repeated over time and trends are identified.

Then, too, politicians face multiple issues at the same time. Some of these are framed as budget issues and some not. Public responses to a budget question out of the larger political context may not give useful guidance to public leaders.

It is important for all users—decision makers, citizens, and the media—to distinguish valid polls from counterfeit polls. Mainstream media, think tanks, and universities undertake many state and local polls. Many polls are legitimate, objective, and scientifically valid. For example, surveys that sample the population are subject to sampling error, meaning that the results may be different from what the entire population would say; the size of the sampling error should be disclosed for each question.

Some polls are fraudulent public relations devices aimed at convincing the “respondents” of some viewpoint or that the sender cares what they think. Other polls (such as self-selected online polls) are not valid readings of opinions held by the general public. Polls are open to abuse and manipulation; loaded wording, differences in the format of questions, sampling bias, and careless or biased analysis of the survey results may distort our understanding of the public’s views.

Surveys both report and shape public opinion. When reading an opinion poll, ask yourself a series of questions and consider the methodology. To whom is the press release appealing? Is this survey a useful tactic in advocacy politics? Is the poll aimed at setting the agenda and
reframing the issues in budgetary politics? Does the poll provide useful guidance to public leaders? How should decision makers look at the results of this poll? Should decision makers be concerned about how important the views are to the respondents and whether voters and taxpayers are likely to act on the opinions they express? What about the snapshot nature of the data? Is the poll legitimate, objective, and scientifically valid, and how do you know? Consider the possibility that the questions with responses that do not support an advocacy political agenda may not be released. After all, who owns the results? If polls are publicly released, should ownership dictate control? Information on sampling error is provided in reputable surveys. Should disclosure information be provided as well? Is it important to know this, and why?

What follows is an analysis of Americans’ attitudes about federal taxes.

- Is the analysis valid?
- What makes you think so?

Assessing the Evidence

John Boehner says they don't, but polls on taxes show many do

The American people don't want us to raise taxes.

John Boehner on Friday, June 24th, 2011 in a press conference

Republicans stopped negotiations on raising the debt limit with Democrats on Thursday June 23, 2011, saying they would not agree to any increases in taxes.

The debt ceiling is the legal limit on the amount of debt the United States is allowed to hold. If the government needs to go over that limit, Congress first needs to grant permission. The U.S. is expected to hit the debt limit—a mind-boggling $14.3 trillion—later this summer.
Republicans, led by Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., have been negotiating with Vice President Joe Biden to try to reach agreement to raise the debt limit. Republicans want spending cuts, but Democrats have said new revenue-raisers should be included as well. Revenue-raisers could include traditional tax increases or could mean ending tax exemptions and closing loopholes.

On Thursday, Speaker of the House John Boehner of Ohio repeated the Republican position that tax increases couldn't be part of any deal:

“Listen, we've got to stop spending money that we don't have, and since the beginning, the majority leader and myself, along with Sen. McConnell and Sen. Kyl have been clear: tax hikes are off the table. First of all: raising taxes is going to destroy jobs. If you raise taxes on the people that we need to grow our economy and to hire new workers, guess what: they're not going to do it if they have to pay higher taxes to the federal government. Second, a tax hike cannot pass the U.S. House of Representatives. It's not just a bad idea, it doesn't have the votes, and it can't happen. And third, the American people don't want us to raise taxes. They know that we've got a spending problem. That's why Republicans passed a budget that pays down debt over time without raising taxes.”

There's a lot in that statement, but we what we wanted to fact-check today is Boehner's final point: The American people don't want us to raise taxes. We've seen polling data that contradicts that, so we thought it was time for a review of the evidence.

As with most polling, the answers you get depend on how you ask the questions.
The pollsters at Gallup conduct an annual survey in which they ask, “Do you consider the amount of federal income tax you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low?”

This year, a majority—50 percent—said “too high.” (That's in line with previous years and even a bit lower than in the 1990s.) Another 43 percent said "about right," and a measly 4 percent said “too low.”

The poll, conducted in April right before Tax Day, also asked about fairness: “Do you regard the income tax which you will have to pay this year as fair?”

To that question, 40 percent say their taxes are not fair, but 57 percent say, yes, their taxes are fair.

So too high, but fair? Isn't that contradictory? Gallup says not necessarily.

“Notably, more Americans consider their taxes fair than say they pay the right amount in taxes (57 percent vs. 43 percent), suggesting more people dislike what they pay than feel it is unjust,” the pollsters concluded.

All right, so nobody likes taxes. But what about public policy?
Boehner’s office referred us to a recent Bloomberg poll on the economy, which asked, ‘Which of the following approaches is more likely to be successful in growing the U.S. economy and creating jobs?’

The number one answer, with 55 percent, was “Spending cuts and tax cuts will give businesses more confidence to hire.” The other choices were, “Government needs to keep spending at current level now because the job market is so weak” (17 percent); “Government needs to spend more to stimulate the economy” (also 17 percent); and “Not sure” (11 percent).

The poll also asked, “Would you be willing to pay more in taxes to reduce the federal deficit, or are you not willing to pay more, even if the deficit grows?” A large majority, 61 percent, said they were not willing to pay more. About 36 percent said they were willing to pay more.

Still, we found a number of polls that indicate people do want the government to raise taxes. That was most clearly the case when it comes to raising taxes on the wealthy and on corporations.

Several polls ask people if taxes should be increased on people who make more than $250,000. Polls show substantial majorities support the idea. We found majorities of 72 percent, 64 percent, and 59 percent. (Those are from April polls by ABC News/Washington Post, McClatchy-Marist, and USA Today/Gallup, respectively.)

On whether corporations pay enough in taxes, Gallup found that 67 percent said they pay too
Finally, we should note one area where we found contradictions on tax increases—in polls that ask people if they favor spending cuts, tax increases, or some combination thereof.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted at the beginning of May found that most people, 52 percent, favored a combination of cuts and tax increases. The NBC/Washington Post poll from April found that number was even higher, at 59 percent.

On the other hand, when you don't give people the option of both, they favor spending cuts over tax increases by significant margins. We found a Reuters/Ipsos poll from March that found people favored spending cuts over tax increase by 56 percent to 30, and a CBS News/New York Times poll from January that put it at 62 to 29.

But then we found polls that asked participants if they preferred cuts to benefits such as Social Security and Medicare over tax increases. In those cases, the results favored tax increases. The CBS News/New York Times poll found that 62 percent favored increasing taxes before Medicare benefits are cut.

We turned to Karlyn Bowman, a senior fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, who studies polling and has conducted a review of polls on taxation. We asked her, why the contradiction? Here's what she had to say:
“Generally, combinations of tax hikes and spending cuts are most popular. It seems fair to most people. Spending cuts are favored in the abstract. Tax hikes are favored as long as they don't affect me. Generally, people don't think anybody should have to pay more than a quarter of their income in total taxes.

“Those are general statements I think we can make. As someone who reads almost all the polls, it is very hard for me to go beyond these generalities. Hypothetical questions about what Congress or the administration should do are especially dangerous because people think in concrete and not abstract terms,’ she said.

Marc Mellman, CEO of the Mellman Group and a Democratic pollster, agreed that people tend to favor a mix of tax hikes and spending cuts when it comes to balancing the budget.

“People don't want to pay more taxes, but to deal with the deficit, they prefer a balanced approach that combines tax increases with spending cuts,” he said.

In conclusion, Boehner said that “the American people don't want us to raise taxes.” In fact, polls indicate that people don't like taxes, but they are often okay with increasing specific taxes or closing loopholes. Additionally, when it's time to make hard decisions about the budget, they favor a balanced approach of spending cuts and tax increases. Finally, they tend to favor tax increases for other people—such as the wealthy or corporations—if not themselves. Overall, we rate his statement Barely True.
Editor's note: This statement was rated Barely True when it was published. On July 27, 2011, we changed the name for the rating to Mostly False.