# Polling and the public

## what every citizen should know

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*To my parents*



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# The problem of nonattitudes 2

To produce an informative and accurate public opinion poll, a number of tasks must be successfully performed. A questionnaire with properly worded and ordered questions must be constructed. A representative sample must be selected and the respondents in that sample correctly interviewed. The data must be analyzed appropriately and the correct conclusions drawn. But before any of these tasks can be performed, a fundamental question must be asked: Is the proposed topic of the poll one on which citizens have genuine opinions? If it is, then the topic is suitable for a public opinion survey. But if the topic is so remote and irrelevant to citizens' concerns that they do not possess real views on it, then a poll on the topic will measure *nonattitudes* rather than attitudes. Any information obtained will be suspect even though the questions are properly worded, the sample scientifically selected, and the data appropriately analyzed.

The problem of nonattitudes is one of the simplest yet most complex problems in public opinion polling. Too often in the survey context people will respond to questions about which they have no genuine attitudes or opinions.[1] Even worse, these nonattitude responses are treated by the analyst as if they represented actual public opinions. Hence, a misleading portrait of public opinion may emerge if no distinction is made between people with real views on an issue and those whose responses simply reflect their desire to appear to be informed citizens in the interview situation. Unfortunately, it is often very difficult to differentiate between genuine attitude holders and persons merely expressing nonattitudes.

The presence of nonattitudes in survey responses has been well documented (Converse 1970; Taylor 1983; Norpoth and Lodge 1985). A particularly intriguing study was carried out by Bishop, Oldendick, and

Tuchfarber (1980) in which a fictitious item was included in surveys conducted in the greater Cincinnati area. Respondents were presented with the following item about the nonexistent Public Affairs Act: "Some people say that the 1975 Public Affairs Act should be repealed. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?" Fully a third of the respondents offered an opinion on this version of the question. When an effort was made to filter out nonattitude responses on this fictitious question, 10 percent of the sample still offered an opinion. (The use of screening or filter questions will be discussed later in this chapter.) Nonattitudes are definitely a problem for would-be interpreters of public opinion.

The existence of nonattitudes is not surprising; after all, the interview is a social situation in which the respondent interacts in person or over the phone with an interviewer whom the respondent does not know. Few in such a circumstance want to admit that they are uninformed, particularly on an issue about which they might be expected by others to be informed. Most people answer the questions, and their responses are duly recorded by the interviewer. Before discussing ways to address the problem of nonattitudes, I would like to illustrate how a public opinion survey based on nonattitudes can go astray and mislead the public.

## An example of nonattitudes

About ten years ago I was part of a sample of Ohioans queried about their views on land use problems. The interview was conducted over the phone, and the sample was probably picked from the telephone book. (I surmised this since the interviewer knew my name.) After the interviewer identified herself and the sponsorship of the poll, she asked:

> Tell me, Mr. Asher, what comes to your mind when you hear the term *land use?*

As a social scientist familiar with public opinion polling, I recognized this question to be a screening question to determine whether it was worthwhile for the interviewer to proceed with the interview with me. Surely, if I did not have the vaguest idea what land use meant, there would be little point in continuing the interview. In any event I responded to the interviewer:

> Hmmm. Land use. How you use the land!

This response must have been sufficiently brilliant for the interviewer continued with the survey. She asked me:





> Mr. Asher, what do you think is the most important land use problem facing Ohio?

I mentally squirmed and silently gave thanks that I was not wired up to electrodes for they would have provided incontrovertible evidence of the difficulty I had in thinking up a land use problem. After a delay of about ten seconds, I responded with something like "planned growth and development." She then asked:

> Which level of government—state, county, or local—do you think should have primary responsibility for addressing the problem of planned growth?

I responded, although to this day I cannot recall which level of government I mentioned. The interview continued, and about three minutes later the interviewer asked me:

> Mr. Asher, what do you think is the second most important land use problem facing Ohio?

This time I really had to struggle for an answer. Finally I uttered triumphantly "sufficient parks and green space." And, of course, the interviewer then asked me which level of government—state, county, or local—should have primary responsibility for rectifying this problem. I gave an answer (which I cannot recall) and said to myself that if the interviewer asked me about the third most important land use problem facing Ohio, I was going to blast her and the entire research project on the grounds that it was measuring nonattitudes. Fortunately for the interviewer, she never asked that question and the interview was completed.

Some months later a report was prepared on the basis of this survey. In the report there appeared statements about which land use problems Ohioans ranked the highest and which levels of government Ohioans wanted to take the lead in addressing these problems. The report made policy recommendations and cited scientific evidence to support its conclusions. As I read the report I got angrier and angrier, for I assumed that most respondents were like me—they gave answers in response to questions but had little information about or interest in land use.

As sponsors of public opinion polls should recognize, not every issue of central importance to them will be an appropriate topic of inquiry within the citizenry at large. Different people have different concerns, and public opinion polls must recognize that fact of life and proceed accordingly.

## The use of screening questions

Steps can be taken in opinion polls to minimize the problem of nonattitudes. The simplest strategy is to make it socially acceptable for respondents to say they are unfamiliar with the topic of the question. This response would result in that question being skipped. Another strategy is to employ screening or filter questions to separate likely attitude holders from nonattitude respondents. With both strategies the intent is to minimize the number of responses that are merely superficial reactions to the interview stimulus. For example, the study cited earlier by Bishop and his colleagues on the fictitious Public Affairs Act employed a variety of screening questions ("Do you have an opinion on this or not?" and "Have you thought much about this issue?") to reduce the frequency of nonattitudes. Respondents who could not pass the screening questions were not asked the Public Affairs Act item.

As another example, the comprehensive study of the American electorate conducted by the Center for Political Studies (CPS) in 1984 utilized a variety of means to lessen the problem of nonattitudes. One item on this 1984 survey asked respondents whether they thought the government in Washington had become too powerful. The exact wording of the question was:

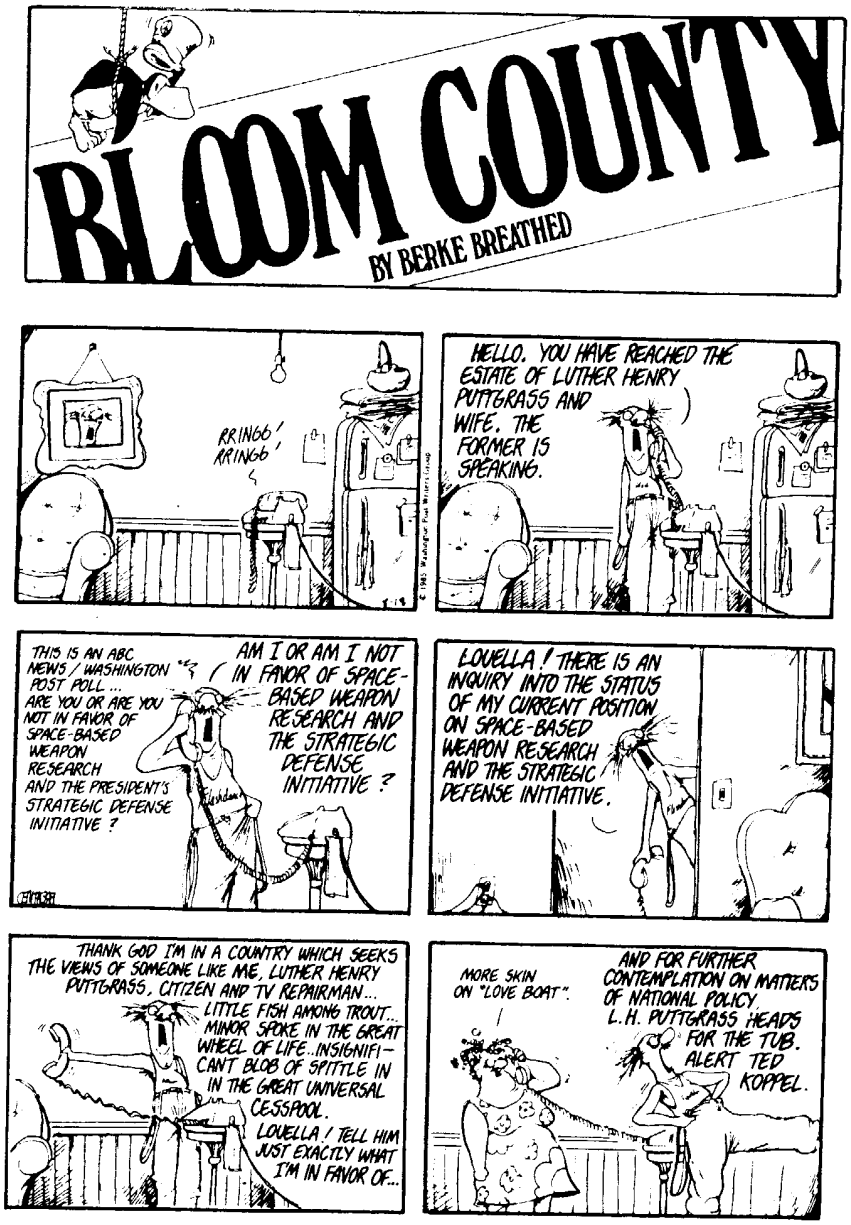
> Some people are afraid the government in Washington is getting too powerful for the good of the country and the individual person. Others feel that the government in Washington is not getting too strong. Do you have an opinion on this or not?

Of the 973 citizens in the sample asked whether they had an opinion, 550 (57 percent) said yes and 423 (43 percent) said no. The sizable 43 percent with no opinion might surprise the reader given the recurring theme of Reagan's presidential victories in 1980 and 1984—namely, the need to reduce the scope and power of the federal government. What this example suggests is that topics hotly discussed by political elites may not be of great importance to the average citizen. In this example, asking people whether or not they had an opinion was a very effective screening question that eliminated about 43 percent of the respondents. One can only speculate as to how many respondents would have answered had the screening question not been used and instead people simply had been asked whether they thought the government was getting too powerful or not. Among the 550 citizens with an opinion on the issue, 311 thought government had gotten too powerful, 218 thought it had not, 10 said it depended, and 11 did not know (even though they had stated in response to the screening question that they









had an opinion on the issue).

Another example of the use of a screening question in the 1984 CPS election study is the following item:

> Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale at point number 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Where would you place yourself on this scale or haven't you thought much about this?

Of the 971 persons asked this question, 150 (about 15 percent) said they had not thought much about the matter. This does not mean that the other 85 percent had thought a lot about the issue and had genuine opinions. The following pattern of responses to this item raises questions about the respondents' answers ($N = 821$):

| $N$ | |
|---|---|
| 48 | 1. Provide many fewer services; reduce spending a lot. |
| 82 | 2. |
| 141 | 3. |
| 293 | 4. |
| 138 | 5. |
| 58 | 6. |
| 48 | 7. Provide many more services; increase spending a lot. |
| 13 | Don't know |

Note that the largest number of responses ($N = 293$) fall in the middle category 4. This may reflect large numbers of citizens who are satisfied with the status quo or who genuinely take a neutral position on the issue. Or it may reflect the tendency of citizens with genuine, nonneutral preferences on the issue to hide them by opting for the safe middle category. Many responses can be moved out of the middle category if a branching format question is utilized in which citizens who opt for the middle category are then asked whether they favor one side or the other more (Aldrich et al. 1982).

The large number of people in the middle category, however, may signal problems of nonattitudes in the measurement. Perhaps some proportion of people in the middle category place themselves there because they do not want to admit to the interviewer that they haven't thought much about the issue or are unable to place themselves along the scale. Hence, they might choose the middle category as a safe





position that makes them seem informed without having to take sides on the issue. If so, then some of the category 4 responses may be nonattitudes rather than genuinely neutral opinions, and the portrait of American public opinion on this issue may be misleading (see p. 30).

In contrast to the pattern of responses on the spending question are citizens' replies to the following item about racial integration:

> Some people think achieving racial integration of schools is so important that it justifies busing children to schools out of their own neighborhoods. Others think letting children go to their own schools is so important that they oppose busing. Where would you place yourself on this scale or haven't you thought much about this?

Here only 69 of 968 respondents (7 percent) said they had not thought much about the issue in contrast to the 15 percent who had not given much thought to the question of government spending. The fact that more people had thought about the busing issue seems intuitively correct since busing on the face of it is more likely to be the kind of issue that hits home and captures citizens' attention. Moreover, the distribution of the busing responses reveals relatively few in the middle category and most responses bunched in the two most antibusing, proneighborhood schools categories ($N = 899$):

| $N$ | |
|---|---|
| 33 | 1. Bus to achieve integration |
| 15 | 2. |
| 25 | 3. |
| 70 | 4. |
| 91 | 5. |
| 186 | 6. |
| 462 | 7. Keep children in neighborhood schools |
| 17 | Don't know |

This skewed pattern of responses demonstrates that few Americans are neutral about busing and that the middle category is not the choice for large numbers of citizens with nonattitudes on the issue. It may also be the case that the meaning of a middle position on the busing item is less clear than it is on the previous question of providing services and thus fewer people opt for the middle position.

A final example of a screening question occurs in a 1984 election survey, conducted by the Survey Research Center-Center for Political Studies (SRC-CPS), concerning the use of "feeling thermometers." In essence, the use of the feeling thermometer rests on the ability of people to relate points on a thermometer to degrees of warmth and coldness

toward objects. Survey respondents were given the following instructions:

> I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward that person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel much for the person. If we come to a person whose name you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next name. If you do recognize the name, but you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person, you would rate the person at the 50 degree mark.

Ideally, citizens who do not recognize a name or feel that they are unable to evaluate a particular individual would indicate that to the interviewer. However, the instructions to the question itself may encourage respondents to place individuals at the 50 degree mark, including individuals whose names they do not recognize. Table 2-1 indicates the proportion of respondents who gave particular ratings to various political figures. (Keep in mind that Howard Baker was the Senate majority leader at the time of the survey, while Robert Dole was a U.S. senator who would become majority leader the next year.)

The percentage of respondents who do not recognize Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale or cannot evaluate them is very small, while the comparable percentages for Baker and Dole are much higher—33 percent and 36.4 percent, respectively. It appears that the screening questions have worked well since more than one-third of the respondents have not rated the less prominent political figures. However, it is disquieting that among the citizens who do assign a thermometer score to these political leaders, many more citizens give a rating of 50 to Baker and Dole than to Reagan and Mondale. Of those citizens evaluating Reagan on the thermometer, only 10.5 percent [10.4/(88.3 + 10.4)] give him a score of 50; the comparable percentage for Mondale is 18.2 [17.7/(79.6 + 17.7)]. But for Baker and Dole, the proportion of citizens using the thermometer who placed them at the midpoint was 37.3 percent [25/(42 + 25)] and 45.8 percent [29.1/(34.5 + 29.1)], respectively.

**Table 2-1** Thermometer Evaluations of Four Politicians

| | Evaluation | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Politician | Rating other than 50 | Rating of 50 | Does not recognize | Cannot evaluate | Total percentage (*N*) |
| Reagan | 88.3% | 10.4% | 0 % | 1.3% | 100% (2,239) |
| Mondale | 79.6 | 17.7 | 0.6 | 2.1 | 100 (2,239) |
| Baker | 42.0 | 25.0 | 25.6 | 7.4 | 100 (2,236) |
| Dole | 34.5 | 29.1 | 26.8 | 9.6 | 100 (2,236) |

Source: Survey Research Center-Center for Political Studies, 1984 election study.

Note: Table entries are the percentage of respondents ranking each politician in each category.





In one sense it is not surprising that more people placed Baker and Dole at 50; the two Republicans were less well known than Reagan and Mondale in 1984 and therefore more likely to evoke neutral responses. But there may also be a problem of measuring nonattitudes here. The greater frequency of 50 ratings for Baker and Dole may indicate that the screening questions did not eliminate all those persons with no genuine attitudes about the two senators.

An indirect test of this notion is presented in Tables 2-2 and 2-3, which show how education levels and degree of interest in the campaign are related to assigning political figures a thermometer score of 50. One might intuitively expect that citizens with higher levels of education would be able to make more discriminating evaluations and therefore would be less likely to assign thermometer scores of 50. But, as

**Table 2-2** Frequency of 50 Ratings of Four Politicians, by Respondents' Education

| Politician | Grade school | High school | Some college | College graduate | Post college |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reagan | 26.2% | 12.8% | 5.1% | 3.2% | 1.7% |
| Mondale | 18.6 | 20.5 | 15.4 | 16.2 | 16.7 |
| Baker | 42.1 | 38.9 | 40.3 | 28.5 | 29.8 |
| Dole | 42.6 | 46.6 | 51.4 | 36.6 | 39.6 |

Source: Survey Research Center-Center for Political Studies, 1984 election study.

Note: Table entries are the percentage of respondents assigning a thermometer score who gave the politician in question a score of 50. For example, the 46.6 in the "high school-Dole" category means that 46.6 percent of respondents with a high school education gave Dole a score of 50; the other 53.4 percent of high school respondents assigned Dole a numerical score other than 50.

**Table 2-3** Frequency of 50 Ratings of Four Politicians by Respondents' Interest in Campaign

| Politician | Very much interested | Somewhat interested | Not very interested |
|---|---|---|---|
| Reagan | 7.0% | 9.9% | 15.9% |
| Mondale | 11.5 | 17.7 | 27.7 |
| Baker | 25.3 | 41.4 | 52.1 |
| Dole | 36.9 | 46.9 | 59.7 |

Source: Survey Research Center-Center for Political Studies, 1984 election study.

Note: Table entries are the percentage of respondents assigning a thermometer score who gave the politician in question a score of 50. For example, the 52.1 in the "Baker-not very interested" category means that 52.1 percent of the not very interested respondents who were able to rate Baker gave him a 50, while the other 47.9 percent gave him a score other than 50.

Table 2-2 indicates, this expectation holds only for evaluations of Reagan; for the other three politicians, there is no consistent pattern.

One possible explanation is that low informational levels were so widespread across educational levels, particularly for Baker and Dole, that education did not have a systematic effect on the frequency of nonattitudes. This explanation, if correct, would suggest that many of the scores of 50 represented nonattitudes rather than well thought out positions of neutrality.

Table 2-3 relates the frequency of 50 ratings to the respondents' level of interest in the campaign. As expected, the more interested the respondents, the less likely they are to assign a score of 50 because of their greater awareness of and involvement in the campaign. This pattern holds for all four political leaders. But note that more than one-fourth of the low-interest respondents rated Mondale at 50, while over one-half rated Baker and Dole at that midpoint. These numbers may suggest that little information went into the evaluations of Dole and Baker and again raise the question whether 50 represents a genuine neutral point or simply a convenient and safe home for the expression of nonattitudes that had not been filtered out by the screening questions.

## Nonattitudes and the middle position in survey questions

The preceding examples illustrate how difficult it is to assess the magnitude of the nonattitude problem. They also raise another problem








*"I'm undecided, but that doesn't mean I'm apathetic or uninformed."*

in attitude and opinion measurement. What does it mean when a person replies to a survey question, "I don't know" or "I can't decide" or "it depends"? Do these responses represent a genuine neutral stance or something else? Should holders of nonattitudes be allowed at the neutral or middle point, or should they be at a distinct point off the measurement scale so as not to create a misleading image of large numbers of citizens thoughtfully adopting the middle position?

The response alternatives included in an item will also affect the extent of nonattitudes. For example, a CBS News/*New York Times* poll conducted in November 1985 asked a national sample of Americans:

"Who should have the most say about what cuts should be made to balance the budget—the President or Congress?" Note that the question did not present respondents with the option that the president and Congress should have equal say. About 4 percent of the sample volunteered this response, but one wonders what percentage of Americans would have opted for this alternative had it been explicitly presented. In marked contrast is the following question asked in a November 1985 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll: "As things presently stand, who do you think is ahead in military power, the United States or the Soviet Union, or do you think they are about the same in military strength?" Twenty-four percent said the United States was ahead, 26 percent the Soviets, 4 percent had no opinion, and 46 percent said that both nations were about the same in military strength. In fact, in the eight times since 1979 that this question has been asked of samples of Americans by ABC News/*Washington Post*, the percentage of respondents citing "the same" has ranged from 34 to 55 with an average of 44. One can only speculate what the responses would have looked like had the middle choice not been provided.

Research has been conducted on the effects of including a middle choice in the response alternatives (Schuman and Presser 1977; Bishop et al. 1980; Presser and Schuman 1980). The inclusion of a middle option typically generates about 25 percent more noncommittal responses. This suggests that the omission of such a choice will result in many substantive responses that are not very meaningful from citizens who have weak to nonexistent attitudes on a subject. In one study Presser and Schuman (1980) administered two forms of a survey item to random subsamples, the only difference between the questions being that a middle alternative was offered on one but not on the other. For example, one item asked about the penalties for using marijuana. It read: "In your opinion, should the penalties for using marijuana be more strict, less strict, or about the same as they are now?" The other version read: "In your opinion, should the penalties for using marijuana be more strict or less strict than they are now?" On average, about 23 percent of the respondents answered "about the same as they are now" when that choice was explicitly included in the question compared with only about 8 percent who volunteered that response when it was not included.

The interpretation of a "don't know" response can be especially problematic since "don't know" can mean many different things (Coombs and Coombs 1976-1977; Faulkenberry and Mason 1978). For some people "don't know" simply reflects the absence of real attitudes on the topic, but for other people it may represent an inability to choose





among contending positions. Smith (1984, 229) points out other ways in which "don't know" responses might arise. Respondents may be too insecure to take a stance. Or they may decline to state their opinions out of a strong sense of privacy or because they do not want to offend anybody. Some respondents may want to hasten the completion of the interview by saying "don't know," thereby avoiding follow-up questions. Just as respondents' nonattitudes may be disguised as attitudes, so too their middle responses (including "don't know") may mask genuine attitudes.

Converse (1976-1977) has investigated characteristics of respondents as well as properties of survey questions that might affect the frequency of "no opinion" and "don't know" answers. She found, as expected, that the higher the level of education of respondents the less likely they were to give "no opinion" replies. With respect to question characteristics, she found that the most important feature was the content of the item. As the subject matter of the question became more and more remote from the concerns and interests of citizens, the frequency of "don't know" responses increased.

Is it a good idea to force responses into polar categories and minimize middle or neutral answers? Or is it better to encourage people to choose the middle position? The answer, of course, depends. If people have genuine attitudes, then the public opinion researcher would want those attitudes clearly expressed. The inclusion of a middle category in such a situation might result in cautious citizens opting for the middle position, particularly on controversial issues where they might not want to reveal their true opinions to the interviewer. Yet the exclusion of a middle category might lead people with weak to nonexistent opinions on an issue to choose one of the genuine response options, thereby creating false impressions of genuine attitudes. A similar dilemma occurs with respect to screening questions. One wants to screen out nonattitudes, but one does not want to make it too easy for people to avoid answering questions on which they have real views or make it too difficult to answer when real, albeit weak, attitudes exist.

Hence, we have a problem without a simple, neat solution. The public opinion pollster and the consumer of the research must simply be sensitive to whether and in what form screening questions were used. They must also be aware of the response alternatives provided to the respondents. Finally, the appropriateness of particular substantive questions to particular samples of citizens should always be a central concern of the political analyst and the public opinion consumer. This latter point is well illustrated in the next section on the stability of survey responses in the context of nonattitudes.

## The "mushiness index"

If one is measuring genuine attitudes in a survey, then one would normally expect some reasonable degree of stability in these responses over time. Yet in many instances survey responses fluctuate wildly over a relatively short period, which raises questions about how real the measured opinions were in the first place. In response to this phenomenon the polling firm of Yankelovich, Skelly and White developed the "mushiness index." The index was designed to assess the volatility in the public's views on issues, particularly those issues about which citizens have little information and understanding yet provide answers to pollsters' questions. The mushiness index has four components in addition to a person's position on a particular issue: how much the issue affects the respondent personally, how well informed the respondent feels on the issue, how much the respondent discusses the issue with family and friends, and the respondent's own assessment of how likely his or her views on the issue will change (Keene and Sackett 1981). On the basis of these criteria, Yankelovich, Skelly and White placed issues into three categories ranging from very volatile, or "mushy," to firm and found in general that attitudes on domestic policy were less mushy than those on foreign policy.

The usefulness of the mushiness index was illustrated by the following example (Keene and Sackett 1981, 51). A sample of Americans was asked: "Do you favor or oppose restricting imports of foreign goods such as Japanese cars, textiles and steel, which are less expensive than American products?" Fifty-four percent favored restricting imports, 41 percent opposed restrictions, and only 5 percent were unsure. But when the sample was broken down into three groups according to the mushiness criteria, the patterns of response were quite different. Among the mushiest group, 39 percent favored restrictions, 37 percent opposed them, and 24 percent were unsure; among the firmest group, 62 percent favored restrictions, 37 percent opposed them, and 1 percent was unsure.

Respondents' knowledge about an issue (one component of the mushiness index) affects their attitudes as an April 1986 CBS News/ *New York Times* poll made clear. The poll queried Americans about their support for the Nicaraguan contras, rebels fighting against the Sandinista government. Overall 25 percent of the sample was willing to give aid to the contras, while 62 percent opposed it. But when the sample was divided according to whether the respondents knew which side the United States supported in Nicaragua, major differences were observed (Shipler 1986). Among those respondents who were aware of which side





the United States favored, 40 percent supported aid to the contras, and 52 percent opposed it. But for those who were not aware of American policy, only 16 percent favored contra aid, while 59 percent opposed such assistance.

The mushiness index is not widely used in surveys, in part because it is too costly and time consuming to ask all the questions needed to construct the index, particularly when multiple substantive issues are covered in the survey. Nevertheless, the concept of mushiness is of interest analytically since it helps explain a number of apparent anomalies in American public opinion. One puzzle is the rapid swings in public opinion often observed after the president of the United States delivers a speech on a single issue, particularly foreign policy. Public opinion is most volatile on issues that seem distant in terms of their likely effects on people and their susceptibility to citizen influence. We often praise the president for his ability to move public opinion, not recognizing that on some issues a somewhat mindless "follow the leader" mentality is at work; the president would be successful in moving public opinion in any direction, assuming he is able to portray the issue in ways beneficial to his own objectives.

The rationale underlying the mushiness index is not new to Yankelovich, Skelly and White; almost forty years ago George Gallup (1947) espoused survey designs that measured multiple aspects of a person's opinion. Indeed, Schuman and Presser (1981) and other investigators have stressed the need to measure the importance of an issue to a person as well as his or her opinion on that issue in order to better understand the dynamics of attitude change. However, Yankelovich, Skelly and White had the public relations acumen to coin a catchy phrase for their work which built on the findings of earlier public opinion studies.

Many survey questions seem to be prime candidates for high mushiness scores, yet unfortunately these scores will not be calculable since the necessary follow-up questions were not asked because of insufficient time and space on the survey. Thus, poll users need to ask themselves whether the topic of the survey is likely to be of concern to the respondents or whether it is more of an abstraction with little immediate and practical relevance. If the former, mushiness and nonattitudes are not likely to be a serious problem. The complicating factor is that the topic of the survey is likely to be of varying importance to different segments of the American population. Unemployed steel and auto workers are more likely to be concerned about foreign imports and thus have more stable attitudes on the issue. Likewise, senior citizens are more likely to have well-developed views on Social Security and

Medicare. American public opinion on a particular issue includes rather divergent views of various subgroups of the population, some of whom have genuine attitudes on the issue, while others do not. Moreover, in trying to relate public opinion to the processes and decisions of government, the whole of public opinion may be less important than the opinion of a particular subset of people. It may be that on certain issues, it is the views of a few people with genuine attitudes that will have the greatest impact on government policy and policy makers.

## Conclusion

The problem of nonattitudes remains one of the least considered aspects of public opinion polling. Other facets of public opinion research such as question wording and sampling receive much more attention, even to the point of being mentioned in television and newspaper reports of public opinion poll results. But very few people raise the most fundamental question of all: Was the topic of the survey of interest to the respondents? Did the poll query people on subjects about which they held genuine views?

As discussed earlier, assessing the actual magnitude of nonattitudes is a very difficult task that is made even more troublesome by the tendency of people to respond to questions not in terms of their actual intent and content, but in terms of the cues provided by the questions and whatever meaning (often idiosyncratic) that they read into them. For example, a person asked whether he or she favored giving foreign aid to Chad might answer the question, not on the basis of any information about Chad, but on the basis of a predisposition toward foreign aid in general. Likewise, citizens asked whether they favored joint American-Soviet space ventures might respond on the basis of their underlying view of the Soviet Union rather than on the basis of concrete views about the optimal way to explore outer space. The pressures in an interview situation to provide an answer may lead respondents to seek out whatever cues are available in order to answer the question. Because of the absence of attitudes about the topic, citizens may impute a variety of meanings to the question to come up with a response.

The problem of nonattitudes should not lead one to disregard polls because on many issues the general public has genuine attitudes and is willing and able to express them. There are other issues on which only a small subset of the public may have real opinions, but even then events may transform such an issue from one followed by only a small part of





the citizenry to one that engages the serious attention of the mass public. Public opinion polls do provide valid assessments of what Americans are thinking; one should simply keep in mind that not all issues are appropriate topics for public opinion surveys.

Nonattitudes are more a problem of the respondent than of the measuring instrument. That is, nonattitudes can arise even when a question is carefully constructed without any loaded words or implied alternatives. The best of questions can still result in the measurement of nonattitudes. Nevertheless, deficiencies in the questions themselves can contribute to the problem of nonattitudes as well as to many other difficulties encountered in public opinion polling. Thus, we now turn to a discussion of how question wording, question order, and question context can affect the results of public opinion polls.

## Note

1. I am using the terms *attitude* and *opinion* interchangeably. Many social scientists differentiate between attitudes and opinions by treating the latter as more transitory, as verbal representations of some underlying attitude. That is, an opinion is viewed as a verbal manifestation of an attitude that is elicited by the public opinion survey. For the purposes of this chapter, this distinction is by no means critical, although the reader should recognize that public opinion data at times may simply be verbal responses (opinions) that we hope accurately reflect some underlying attitudes.