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Opinion Polling: A Question of What to Ask

By DALIA SUSSMAN

W. H. Auden couldn't have had public opinion polls in mind when he wrote that "to ask the hard question is simple."

Consider the way Americans feel about changing the health care system. In July, with debate at its most heated, a New York Times/CBS News poll found that 66 percent of Americans supported the so-called public option. Around the same time, Time magazine reported that 56 percent supported it, a Pew poll found 52 percent in favor, and a Fox News poll reported the support at 44 percent.

Each organization had good data to buttress its findings, but you could be forgiven for rolling your eyes and dismissing them all.

What was going on? Some might say that opinion on health care over the summer was unsettled and fluid, and conflicting polls reflected that. But in evaluating results, the way a question is worded can be significant. Certain differences are easier to spot, like biased or loaded wording, or unbalanced choices. But the inclusion of small, seemingly innocuous phrases can elicit widely varying responses to questions that otherwise seem the same.

"One way to look at what appear to be inconsistent results is to point the fingers at the respondents and say obviously they haven't thought through what they really think," Prof. Jon A. Krosnick of Stanford said. "Another possibility is to say: Look closely at the questions and let's really be sure."

In the polling about the public option, the wording did indeed vary. The Times/CBS poll explained the plan as "a government administered health insurance plan — something like the Medicare coverage that people 65 and older get." The other polls did not mention Medicare. The Time poll gauged support for "a government-sponsored public health insurance option." Pew asked about "a government health insurance plan." The Fox News poll asked about "a government-run health insurance plan."

"The compelling explanation is not that the public doesn't know what they think, but in fact that these questions are different," Mr. Krosnick said, "and that the public in fact is very tuned into those details." Other factors may have been at work, too, like where the question was in the questionnaire. That's part of the great challenge of question writing.

Polling on health care last summer was particularly difficult since there was no specific bill then to refer to. "It's tough to come up with wording that precisely portrays proposals that themselves haven't been clearly defined," Gary Langer, director of polling at ABC News, wrote on his blog in August while noting the differences in the polls.

In September, many polls asked people if they supported or opposed President Obama's proposed changes to the health care system, but the Times/CBS poll offered respondents the choice of saying that they did not know enough about the changes yet to say. The result: Nearly half of the respondents, 46 percent, said just that. The other polls showed different degrees of support or opposition to Mr. Obama's proposals largely because they did not offer the "don't know enough yet" option. The right approach is debatable. Some argue that offering respondents that option makes it too easy for them to avoid thinking it through and offering a real opinion.

Polls on issues like abortion, affirmative action and the death penalty further show the importance of wording. For example, ask people if they consider themselves "pro-life" or "pro-choice" and you'll get one answer. Ask them if they think abortion should be legal or illegal, and you may get another. They're not necessarily contradictory — someone may consider himself "pro-life" but as a matter of

policy still say abortion should be generally available. That is a nuance often missed. A Gallup poll last spring reported that most Americans are pro-life. Some people took that to mean that most are opposed to legal abortion. That wasn't the case, as would have been clear had the wording been noted. In fact, in a different question in the same poll, just 23 percent said abortion should be illegal in all circumstances.

Affirmative action presents another challenge. Polls gauging support for programs that give "preferences" to minorities generally show majority opposition. But when a Times/CBS poll asked about programs that "make special efforts to help minorities get ahead," including the phrase, "in order to make up for past discrimination," half were in favor.

On issues like race, where opinion may be particularly complicated and respondents are likely to give the answer they think pollsters are looking for, multiple questions and slight variations in wording can give a more complete picture of public opinion.

Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, The Times asked respondents if they thought that most people they knew would or would not vote for a presidential candidate who was black. The expectation was that respondents would answer more honestly than they would if they were asked the question of themselves. Indeed, in a poll that July, 90 percent said they would vote for a black candidate, but only 69 percent said most people they knew would.

Other polls have taken a more direct approach with race but use specific words to help soften the language in the hopes of getting a more truthful response. For instance, while measuring feelings of racism, an ABC News poll released in early 2009 asked respondents if they have "at least some" feelings of prejudice if they "honestly assessed" themselves (35 percent said they did).

Context is also important. Asked if they support or oppose the death penalty for people convicted of murder, a clear majority of Americans were in favor, a Quinnipiac University poll in 2008 found. Asked if they prefer the death penalty or life in prison with no chance of parole, they were more evenly divided.

So the next time a poll is released, carefully check the questions. Public opinion might not be fickle — wording could be the difference.

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