

The Role of Public Opinion Research in the Democratic Process: Insights from Politicians, Journalists, and the General Public

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Abstract

This study reveals the existence of a paradox in how the public views polling within the democratic process. Specifically, even though the public believes that it can influence policymaking, it considers public opinion polls not as useful as other, less representative forms of public input, such as comments at town hall meetings. Analyzing data from multiple surveys conducted in the United States of America, we find no evidence for the democratic representation hypothesis with respect to polling. Comparisons across stakeholders (public, journalists, and politicians) demonstrate that general perceptions of inputs into the democratic process are similar, which confirms the citizen-elite congruence hypothesis. However, unlike members of the public, experts are more likely to believe that public opinion polls are the optimal method by which the public can successfully inform policymaking, a finding consistent with the legitimization hypothesis. With respect to perceptions of politicians, we found substantial differences regarding party registration with Democrats and Independents favoring public opinion polling and Republicans preferring alternative methods (e.g., town hall meetings) of informing policymakers.

Keywords: public opinion research, public policy, democratic representation, policymaking, survey value, preferences, media, politicians



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There has long been a connection between public opinion polling and policymaking (Burstein, 2003, 2010; Page & Shapiro, 1983, 2010; Sobel, 2001; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). With respect to democratic representation, polling has an important democratic function by informing politicians about beliefs of the electorate, which may guide their policy decisions (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2007). Compared with other public policy input sources such as town hall meetings, campaign events, demonstrations, phone calls, letters, or emails from members of the public to a politician or policymaker, public opinion surveys remain the most systematic and representative aggregations of public opinion (Verba, 1996).

Policy leaders have for many years used public opinion polls both to understand what the public thinks and to actively shape public opinion (Jacobs & Shapiro, 1995, 2000). Public opinion is also used by the public as a source of information regarding what other people think (Moy & Rinke, 2012). While political elites regularly conduct their own public opinion polls, the public relies on others to sponsor them. This role is often taken by the media, which at the same time summarizes public opinion data derived from other sources such as think tanks, town hall meetings, attendance at political events, and person-on-the-street interviews (Herbst, 1993; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2005; Rosenstiel, 2005; Strömbäck, 2012).

This research investigates the perceived role of public opinion research in the democratic process by contrasting perceptions of members of the public with elite perceptions of journalists and politicians. Public opinion research is compared with other policy input sources (e.g., interest groups) and other means by which the pub-

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This research uses data from the Roper Archive (USAIPOGNS1999-9904022; USPSRA2001-POL015A; USPSRA2001-POL015B). The data sets were collected by the Kaiser Family Foundation and by the Gallup organization.

We refer to data reports by Kantar (<https://us.kantar.com/public-affairs/politics/2013/kantars-path-to-public-opinion/>) and McClatchy-Marist (http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/misc/usapolls/us170323_MCC_HBO/Complete%20Survey%20Findings_McClatchy-Marist%20Poll_March%202017.pdf).

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lic can interact with politicians (e.g., town hall meetings) and influence their decision making. We also investigate which political party is less or more supportive of public opinion research (e.g., Democrats or Republicans). While the study is mainly exploratory, three specific research hypotheses are examined. First, the *democratic representation hypothesis*, which assumes that in a democracy, citizens prefer that politicians base their decisions on the views of the public. Second, the *elite-citizen congruence hypothesis* that postulates similarity between the perceptions of both groups. Third, the *legitimization hypothesis*, which suggests that elites perceive polling as more influential than do members of the public because they use polling professionally. For the empirical analyses, we use data of four studies from the United States of America, which measured perceptions regarding the societal role of public opinion research across members and the public, journalists, and politicians.

The paper continues with an overview of previous research on democratic representation through polling from the perspective of citizens and elites. Afterward, we describe our data and methods, present the empirical results, and discuss our findings.

Democratic Representation and Polling

While certainly not without problems such as nonattitudes, information levels, and multiple conflicting preferences (Burstein, 2010; Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992), findings from public opinion polls have many important functions within a democracy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Page, 1994; Shapiro, 1998; 2011). No function is more important, though, than its role informing and providing policy decision-makers and the public with reliable information regarding general public sentiment and preferences regarding contentious policy issues. Of course, policy decisions are also based on input from sources other than public opinion (Burstein, 2003; Gray, 2004; Verba, 1996). MacInnis, Anderson, and Krosnick (2018, 9) identify six different information sources which policymakers in Congress often consider: the general public, the issue public, economic elites, donors and sponsors, political parties, and the president. Two of these sources relate to the public (general and issue), three to special interest groups (economic elites, donors, and sponsors), and two to political elites (political parties and the president). Other information sources that may also receive attention include the media and both policy and political experts (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000).

Our data allows us to examine the *democratic representation hypothesis* with respect to public opinion polls, which suggests that in a democracy public opinion influences governmental decisions (Newport et al., 2013). Following this argument,

polling - as the most representative aggregations of public opinion (Verba, 1996) – should be perceived as the ideal way of affecting political decision-making.

There are only a few studies that have compared the various information sources and interest groups that may supply inputs to public officials for policymaking purposes and those comparisons have mostly focused on the opinions of the general public (Doherty, 2013; Doherty et al., 2019; MacInnis, Anderson, & Krosnick, 2018; Soroka, 2002). MacInnis, Anderson, and Krosnick (2018) found that the public believes members of Congress should pay the most attention to the general public and to people who feel strongly about an issue, while believing that their representatives actually pay more attention to the preferences of their supporters, campaign donors, and economic elites. Doherty et al. (2019) examined the relative differences between three different groups of representations in the policy formation process (campaign promises, voters, the general public) and found that the public believes all three should be considered equally. Soroka (2002) used data collected from several different sources, including the public, the media, and elected officials, concluding that both the public and the media play important roles in policymaking and agenda-setting. In summary, existing studies have not compared public opinion polling to other policy inputs in the eyes of the public, nor have the views of the public with respect to the role of polling been compared to the beliefs of elites.

Politicians and Polling

Politicians receive policy input from many different sources including the public, interest groups, lobbyists, the media, experts, their party and other politicians, from which they have to select and prioritize, especially when considering important political questions (Walgrave et al., 2018). Starting at least as far back as Kennedy, U.S. presidents have used public opinion polls to understand what the public thinks about various issues (Beal & Hinckley, 1984; Heith, 1998). Thus, Presidents and political candidates are believed to consider and consult polls for elections and when making important political decisions. Public opinion research has likewise informed policymakers on the state level almost since its inception (e.g., Erikson, 1976; Percival, Johnson, & Neiman, 2009).

When comparing the decision-making process of politicians with that of the electorate, Sheffer et al. (2018) showed that the reasoning characteristics of the two groups are quite comparable. This may also be applicable to polling so that attitudes and values toward polling possibly will have the same effect for the public and for politicians on their perception of polling within the democratic process (*citizen-elite congruence hypothesis*; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001; André & Depauw, 2017). In addition, studies by Cayton (2017) and Joly, Hofmans, and Loewen (2018) showed partisanship-based differences within political elites. Joly, Hofmans, and Loewen (2018), for example, reported higher levels of openness to

experience among progressive political parties. Thus, we may observe likewise party differences regarding beliefs about public opinion polling.

Media and Polling

Public opinion polling is also inextricably linked to mass media coverage (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2005; Rosenstiel, 2005; Strömbäck, 2012). Many media organizations conduct their own public opinion polls and also gather and summarize polling data from multiple sources. Journalists use the results of public opinion surveys to inform the public about political issues such as opinion trends and politician ratings (Rosenstiel, 2005). Through that active and highly visible role, the news media may be considered the “leading actor” in the public opinion polling business (Gollin, 1987, 87). Frequent polling updates became possible through the introduction of telephone interviewing in the late 1970s (Curtin, Presser, & Singer 2005), which allowed for the fast and inexpensive gathering of nation-wide public opinion data. The introduction of web surveys over the past two decades (Couper & Miller, 2008) served to accelerate this process. While media reports of public opinion data regarding countless societal questions have become an integral part of everyday life, those reports receive even greater attention during election periods, when findings are reported daily (Hillygus, 2011; Patterson, 2005). While public opinion polls clearly receive considerable attention from the news media, there is little existing evidence as to the relative value that media actors place on public opinion as a public policy input source. In this context, the *legitimization hypothesis* suggests that media actors are likely to assume a relatively high impact of polling within the democratic process, since this would legitimize their professional efforts in this area.

Public Perceptions of Polling

On a societal level, a variety of factors, including misuse and misinterpretation of polling data, over-surveying, and both marketing and fundraising under the guise of public opinion research, have converged to undermine the legitimacy of public opinion polling (Johnson, 2018). In response, researchers have begun to investigate the public’s perceptions of public opinion research by studying the “survey climate” in various nations (e.g., de Leeuw et al., 2019; Gengler et al., 2019; Looseveldt & Storms, 2008; Lyberg & Lyberg, 1991; Stocké & Langfeldt, 2004). Measures of survey climate capture societal factors such as trust in public institutions, civic and social engagement, and satisfaction with democracy, as well as individual factors such as knowledge of, trust in, and beliefs regarding the value and reliability of surveys, and the degree to which citizens pay attention to and discuss them (de Leeuw et al., 2019; Looseveldt & Joye, 2016). While intuition suggests that positive

beliefs regarding the efficacy of public opinion surveys should be associated with support for their use in policy decision-making, there is currently no evidence that addresses this question.

We turn now to original analyses of multiple data sets that provide the opportunity to investigate these questions regarding public perceptions of the value of opinion polling as a policy input and how they compare with the beliefs of other actors in the policy process: politicians and journalists.

Methods

Data

This article examines survey data from four data sets in which the general public (Studies 1 and 2), journalists (Study 3), and politicians (Study 4) were each interviewed (see Table 1). All data sets relied on telephone survey methodology and were collected between 1999 and 2001 by Gallup Research and the Kaiser Family Foundation in the United States of America. All data were obtained from the Roper Center Public Opinion Data Archive.¹

The two surveys of the public (Studies 1 and 2) both used probability sampling approaches and included more than 1,000 respondents (see Table 1). A response rate was not available for Study 1. For Study 2, the response rate was 62.3% (Princeton Survey Research Associates 2001a). In addition, two expert surveys were available, one with journalists and one with politicians (Brodie et al. 2001). The survey of journalists (Study 3) included professionals from top newspapers (180), TV and radio networks (70), and news services and magazines (51). The politician survey (Study 4) included 96 senior executive branch officials, 2 members of Congress, 40 senior Congressional staff, 70 think tank scholars, 54 lobbyists, and 38 trade association executives. The response rate of Study 3 was 44.9%, and the response

1 **Study 1:** Gallup Organization. Gallup Poll: Baseline Study on Polls and Polling Organization Awareness, 1999 [Dataset]. Roper #31088772, Version 2. Gallup Organization [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research [distributor]. doi:10.25940/ROPER-31088772.

Study 2: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation in collaboration with Public Perspective magazine. Kaiser Family Foundation/Public Perspective Magazine Poll: Polling & Democracy, 2001 [Dataset]. Roper #31096753, Version 2. Princeton Survey Research Associates [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research [distributor]. doi:10.25940/ROPER-31096753.

Studies 3 and 4: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation in collaboration with Public Perspective magazine. Kaiser Family Foundation/Public Perspective Magazine Poll: Polling & Democracy: Policy Makers and Media, 2000 [Dataset]. Roper #31096754, Version 1. Princeton Survey Research Associates [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research [distributor]. doi:10.25940/ROPER-31096754.

rate of Study 4 was 27.9% (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2001b). Detailed information regarding each study is available from the reports cited here and from the Roper Center Archive. Table 2 summarizes the demographics and political orientations of respondents from all four surveys. Considering sample composition, the sample of journalists was especially unbalanced regarding party registration and political ideology since it was composed of only 4.7% Republicans and 6.3% Conservatives. Therefore, the results regarding political orientations should be treated with caution for this group, and the overall results reflect primarily the

Table 1 Overview of the Survey Data Sources (all USA)

Study	Organization	Year	Population	Sample Size	Survey Mode	Sampling Method	Response Rate
1	Gallup	1999	Public	1,011	Telephone	Probability	NA ^a
2	Kaiser	2001	Public	1,206	Telephone	Probability	62.3%
3	Kaiser	2001	Journalists	301	Telephone	Nonprobability	44.9%
4	Kaiser	2001	Politicians	300	Telephone	Nonprobability	27.9%

^a A response rate was requested, but not available (NA) for Study 1.

Table 2 Description of the Survey Data Sources

	Study 1 Public	Study 2 Public	Study 3 Journalists	Study 4 Politicians
Education ^a				
Low	40.3%	43.3%	NA	NA
Medium	28.3%	21.7%	NA	NA
High	31.4%	34.9%	NA	NA
Age (mean)	44.7 years	44.6 years	45.5 years	49.3 years
Female	52.2%	53.2%	36.2%	25.3%
Party Registration				
Republican	40.5%	35.0%	4.7%	24.3%
Independent	15.3%	25.7%	31.1%	27.6%
Democrat	44.2%	39.4%	64.2%	46.2%
Political Ideology				
Conservative	38.7%	36.5%	6.3%	19.2%
Moderate	41.2%	41.2%	66.0%	54.9%
Liberal	20.1%	22.3%	27.6%	25.9%
(n)	1206	1000	301	300

^a Education was not available (NA) for Study 3 and 4.

perspectives of journalists with other political orientations. The sample size of the journalist survey (Study 3) was 301, and the politician survey (Study 4) included 300 respondents.

Measures

The precise question wordings of all questions examined in this paper are provided in the Online Appendix.

Attention to polling. All four data sets included a measure on how much attention respondents felt should be paid to polling when policy decisions are being made. Specifically, the Gallup data set included three questions as to whether or not policymakers, the U.S. president, or the public as a whole would be better off if more or less attention would be given to polling. The three Kaiser data sets included a rating question in which respondents were asked how much attention governmental officials are currently paying to several policy input sources (their own knowledge, their conscience, lobbyists, campaign contributors, journalists, policy experts, members of the public, and public opinion polls). The public dataset included an experimental design in which a random half of respondents were assigned to a different version of the before-mentioned question, which used the exact same wording but asked respondents how much attention “should be” (rather than “is”) paid to each of the several policy-input sources, allowing a comparison of those responses.

Preferences of the public. Studies 2-4 included comparative measures of respondents’ opinions regarding different ways that public preferences could influence political decision-making. Specially, those studies included questions that asked how important respondents felt that (1) town hall meetings, (2) conducting public opinion polls, (3) talking to people at shopping malls and on the street, and (4) talking to people who call, write or e-mail the official’s office, were as ways of learning what the majority of the public believes. The question was asked in two ways, first, all respondents received the question in a rating format in which they were asked to rate each of the response alternatives as a very good, somewhat good, not too good, or not at all good way to learn what the majority believes (rating). Afterward, all respondents were asked to identify which of these methods of obtaining policy input they rated as the most valuable for political officials (ranking).

Survey value. All four surveys included measures of the perceived value of surveys. In Study 1 and 2, survey value was measured using 2 (alpha = .570) or 3 items (alpha = .671), respectively. These measures included questions such as “polls on social and political issues serve a useful purpose” and “do you feel polls give you a better understanding of the news of the day, or not.” In Study 3 and 4, one item was available to assess survey value: “Public opinion polling is far from

perfect, but it is one of the best means we have for communicating what the public is thinking.”

Background variables. The four studies included several background questions. Those questions asked respondents to report their gender, age, and education. Respondents were also asked to report their political affiliation (Republican, Democrat, or Independent) and political ideology (conservative, moderate, or liberal). For Study 3 and 4, education was not available.

Analyses

Three sets of analyses are presented. First, means and mean differences between the experimental groups (Study 2) and between the different samples are tested using t-tests for single comparisons and One-way ANOVAs with Bonferroni ad-hoc tests of multiple means. These assess the extent to which the public thinks that policymakers should pay more or less attention to public opinion polls and to other potential sources of information. They also enable us to compare public opinion about the use of public opinion polls in policymaking to the opinions of policymakers and journalists. Second, logistic and linear regression models are calculated to test for possible predictors of the measures of “attention to polling” and “preferences of the public.” In those models, we use logistic regressions when the dependent variable was dichotomous and linear regressions when the dependent variable was measured with a rating scale. Independent variables include survey value, political orientations, and demographics. Third, correlation coefficients are calculated to test the congruency between the beliefs of the public and the two expert groups. For example, the means of the answers to the eight rating questions on the policy input sources of the public are correlated with the mean answers of politicians and journalists. All analyses are unweighted.

Results

RQ1: Public Perceptions of the Role of Public Opinion Research

Using Study 1, we first examined whether members of the public think that policymakers should use information from surveys more or less than they currently do (see Table 3). The three questions that directly ask respondents whether more or less attention should be paid to polling by policymakers, the president, or the general public each show that the public believes there should be less attention given to polling (differences ranged from -17.0% to -23.0%, $p < .001$). While 51% or more of the respondents thought that polling should receive less attention, not more than 37% believed that there should be more attention paid to polling.

Table 3 Attention that policymakers, the president, or the country as a whole *should* pay to polling

	Policymakers ^a	President ^a	General public ^a
Less/too much attention ^b	56.6	51.2	55.6
More/not enough attention ^b	36.6	34.2	32.2
Right amount ^c	1.8	4.7	5.6
Don't know/refusal ^c	5.0	9.7	6.5
(n)	1011	1011	1011

^a in percent

^b The policymaker and president questions asked respondents whether policymakers pay “too much” or “not enough” attention to polls, and the general public question asked respondents whether “less” or “more” attention than now should be paid to polls by policymakers (see Online Appendix for the question wording).

^c Those response options were not stated in the question and only volunteered.

Data source: Study 1, Gallup 1999 (General Population)

Next, we examined predictors of support for the use of surveys by policymakers, by the president, and by the general public. In general, the logistic regression models presented in Table 4 indicate that respondents who perceived surveys as more valuable were more likely to believe that more attention should be given to polling in the policymaking process. Also, Democrats, Liberals, respondents of younger age, those with less education, and females had a higher probability of believing that surveys should receive more consideration regarding policy decisions. Notably, the results in Table 4 are very similar for each information recipient (policymakers, the president or the general public), suggesting that public beliefs regarding the importance of polling in the policymaking process are fairly stable.

Using Study 2, we also compared public beliefs about the extent to which surveys should be used more/less in policymaking with public beliefs about whether other sources of information should be (and are) used more or less. When comparing the various policy input sources, the public believes that policymakers pay the most attention to campaign contributors and lobbyists, while polls are rated as sixth out of the eight policy input sources examined (see Table 5). In contrast, the public believes that policymakers should pay much less attention to campaign contributors and lobbyists and more attention to the public, represented through members who contact them and via public opinion polls. The great discrepancy between beliefs of the public on how much attention politicians pay and should pay to various policy input sources can be illustrated by the correlation between the mean values for each, which was $-.445$. When considering how policymakers should be informed by the public, input from members of the public who directly contact them was preferred compared to mediated input through polling. Notably, when the question

Table 4 Predictors of whether more or less attention *should* be paid to polling by policymakers, the president, or the general public

	Policymakers	President	General Public
Education	.617***	.665***	.508***
Age	.986**	.988*	.991
Female	1.426*	1.545*	1.101
Party registration (ref. Republican)			
Independent	1.866*	1.367	.848
Democrat	1.967***	1.991***	1.779**
Political Ideology (ref. conservative)			
Moderate	1.019	1.206	1.403
Liberal	1.797*	1.760*	1.809*
Survey value	2.342***	2.095***	4.406***
R ²	.285	.250	.452
(n)	772	706	746

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Note. Analyses are based on logistic regression models connected to Table 3 (1=more/not enough attention, 0=less/too much attention). Odds ratios and Nagelkerke’s Pseudo-R² are displayed.

Data source: Study 1, Gallup 1999 (General Population)

of whether polling should receive more attention than it receives now was asked in two separate questions, and in context with multiple other policy input sources, the public believed that polling should receive more attention than it does now (difference = .265, $t(1172) = 5.543$, $p < .001$), which somewhat contradicts the results of Table 3 and illustrates that univariate distributions should always be interpreted with consideration of the question context.

The question of how much attention ‘polls’ and ‘members of the public’ should receive by policymakers compared to the other policy input sources (see Column 2 “Should pay attention” in Table 5) allowed us to examine the democratic representation hypothesis. While this hypothesis is supported for ‘members of the public’ (ranked first), ‘polling’ is only ranked fifth out of eight and even ‘policy experts’ (ranked fourth) are assessed as a preferable policy input source compared to polling (difference = .295, $t(570) = 6.771$, $p < .001$). Hence, the democratic representation hypothesis is not supported for public opinion polling.

In Study 2, several of the inputs that respondents were asked about focused on other sources of information about public opinion (e.g., town hall meetings, etc.), facilitating comparisons between beliefs about these sources of information with

Table 5 Comparison of the public, journalists, and politicians beliefs regarding sources public officials pay attention to (and should pay attention to)

	Public		Journalists	Politicians
	Pay attention	Should pay attention	Pay attention	Pay attention
Own knowledge	3.20 ^b	3.38 ^a	3.36 ^a	3.46 ^a
Their conscience	2.79 ^{bd}	3.35 ^{acd}	2.90 ^{bd}	3.15 ^{abc}
Lobbyists	3.31 ^{bc}	2.35 ^{acd}	3.66 ^{abc}	3.41 ^{bd}
Campaign contributors	3.52 ^{bcd}	2.33 ^{acd}	3.68 ^{abd}	3.32 ^{abc}
Journalists	2.77 ^b	2.30 ^{acd}	2.66 ^b	2.83 ^b
Policy experts	3.13 ^b	3.34 ^{acd}	3.01 ^b	3.08 ^b
Members of the public	2.62 ^{bd}	3.46 ^{acd}	2.73 ^{bd}	2.93 ^{abc}
Polls	2.78 ^{bcd}	3.05 ^{ac}	3.28 ^{abd}	3.10 ^{ac}
(n)	600	600	301	300

Note. The table displays means. Response categories: 1 “not at all” 2 “not too much” 3 “a fair amount” 4 “a great deal”

Differences between the means are tested with post-hoc-tests of multiple means using Bonferroni correction. “a” refers to significant differences ($p < .05$) between public “pay attention” and the three other measurements; “b” refers to significant differences ($p < .05$) between public should pay attention and the other three measurements; “c” refers to significant differences ($p < .05$) between journalists and the three other measurements; “d” refers to significant differences ($p < .05$) between politicians and the other three measurements.

Data sources: Studies 2 to 4, Kaiser 2001 (General Population, Expert Samples Journalists and Politicians)

beliefs about public opinion polls. The results show that holding a town hall meeting was the approach most favored by the public for influencing policy decisions (see Table 6). In comparison, conducting a public opinion poll was rated third when the question was asked in the rating format, and second when the question was asked in the ranking format.

Altogether, with respect to our first research question about the preferences of the public, the results suggest that the public does not prefer public opinion polling compared to other, more direct means of having policy input. In fact, when asked specifically, they believe that polling should have less impact on policymaking. In line with that, the public believes that direct ways of communicating with politicians, for instance, through town hall meetings, are a better way to influence policy decisions. Most supportive of public opinion polling as a policy input source were those members of the public who place greater value in them. Political orientation, in contrast, did not have an impact on perceptions about the policy relevance of opinion polling.

Table 6 Different ways policymakers can learn what the public wants

	Public		Journalists		Politicians	
	Rating	Ranking	Rating	Ranking	Rating	Ranking
Holding a town meeting	3.38	43.0	3.17	25.2	3.20	33.6
Conducting a public opinion poll	3.10	25.4	3.29	51.8	3.13	49.8
Talking to people at shopping malls or on the street	2.98	13.0	2.84	7.6	2.75	10.5
Talking to people who call, write, or e-mail	3.18	15.3	2.76	3.3	2.73	6.1
(n)	1187	1165	299	265	299	277

Note. Response categories: Rating: 1 “not at all good” 2 “not too good” 3 “somewhat good” 4 “very good”; Ranking: Best way in %

Data sources: Studies 2 to 4, Kaiser 2001 (General Population, Expert Samples Journalists and Politicians)

RQ2: Perceptions of Politicians and Journalists of the Role of Public Opinion Research

We next turned our attention to comparing public beliefs about how much surveys are used in policymaking with the beliefs of two important groups of experts – politicians and journalists. Confirming the citizen-elite congruence hypothesis, compared to the public and to each other, journalists and politicians have a very similar view of how much attention policymakers pay to the various policy input sources available (see Table 5, Study 2 to 4). The correlation between the beliefs of the public and journalists was .851, the correlation between the beliefs of the public and politicians was .779, and the correlation between the beliefs of journalists and politicians was .870. Supplementary analyses of politicians with respect to party registration show that the congruence between beliefs of the public and politicians is driven by Democrats ($r = .774$) and Independents ($r = .856$), whereas for Republicans ($r = .335$) the hypothesis is not supported (see Table A.1). With respect to polls, Table 5 shows that the public actually somewhat underestimates how much attention politicians pay to polling when considering policy decisions. In contrast, journalists slightly overestimate the impact of polling on policymaking.

With respect to who believes that polling influences policymaking, the model for journalists did not reveal a significant effect of any of the explanatory variables, while for politicians, gender was the only impactful variable (Table 7). Spe-

Table 7 Predictors of whether more or less attention is (or should be) paid to polling

	Public (pay attention)	Public (should pay attention)	Journalists (pay attention)	Politicians (pay attention)
Education ^a	.032	-.224***	NA	NA
Age	.051*	-.024	-.004	.003
Female	-.050	.065	-.086	-.256**
Party registration (ref. Republican)				
Independent	.028	.128	-.072	.082
Democrat	.123	.313**	-.140	.217
Political Ideology (ref. conservative)				
Moderate	.110	-.094	.067	.038
Liberal	.041	-.136	.096	-.006
Survey value	.024	.132***	.071	.051
R ²	.025	.186	.018	.067
(n)	469	445	240	259

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Note. Analyses are based on OLS regression models and connected to Table 5.

^a Education was not available (NA) for Study 3 and 4.

Data sources: Studies 2 to 4, Kaiser 2001 (General Population, Expert Samples Journalists and Politicians)

cifically, politicians who were male perceived surveys as more important for policymaking than female politicians.

When comparing the different ways, the public can influence political decision-making, the comparison of the three groups of respondents' shows that both expert samples, journalists and politicians, rate conducting public opinion polls more favorably than does the public (see Table 6). Specifically, the ranking questions show that about 50% of both groups of experts rated public opinion polls as the most important source of input from the public. For these two groups, town hall meetings ranked second with a difference of at least 20 percentage points. The differential perceptions of the three groups are also reflected by the correlations, which show that the answers of journalists and politicians correlate at .948 for the rating and .992 for the ranking items, and the correlation between the public and journalists was only .342 for the rating and .469 for the ranking items, and between the public and politicians .608 for the rating and .573 for the ranking items. This result suggests that there seems to be a lack of citizen-elite congruence with respect

Table 8 Predictors of whether conducting a poll is a good way to inform the public

	Public		Journalists		Politicians	
	Rating	Ranking	Rating	Ranking	Rating	Ranking
Education ^a	-.090***	.973	NA	NA	NA	NA
Age	-.001	1.016	.002	.987	.003	1.005
Female	.116**	.949	.105	1.375	-.193*	.456*
Party registration (ref. Republican)						
Independent	.047	.698	.158	3.776	.236*	3.177*
Democrat	.046	.784	.143	2.218	.311**	2.792*
Political Ideology (ref. conservative)						
Moderate	-.047	1.111	-.164	.588	-.096	.427
Liberal	.012	1.563	-.217	.662	-.039	.511
Survey value	.170***	1.433***	.509***	6.863***	.299***	4.511***
R ²	.272	.109	.393	.324	.287	.348
(n)	921	914	241	221	261	246

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Note. OLS regression models are based on the ratings in Table 6; logistic regression models are based on the rankings in Table 6. For the logistic regression models, odds ratios and Nagelkerke’s Pseudo-R² are displayed.

^a Education was not available (NA) for Study 3 and 4.

Data sources: Studies 2 to 4, Kaiser 2001 (General Population, Expert Samples Journalists and Politicians)

to how the public can best affect political decisions. However, supplementary analyses of party registration for politicians (see Table A.2) show that the rankings and ratings of Republicans are quite similar to the public ($r = .908$ for the rating, $r = .889$ for the ranking), whereas there is a lack of congruence for Democrats ($r = .553$ for the rating, $r = .415$ for the ranking) and independent politicians ($r = .628$ for the rating, $r = .642$ for the ranking).

When considering for whom polling is believed to be the optimal approach for the public to inform policy decision-making, for all three groups—the public, journalists, and politicians—perceived survey value was an important variable (see Table 8). In addition, we observed a negative effect of education and a positive effect for female respondents in the public data set (Study 2), and positive effects for male respondents, Independents, as well as Democratic party registration for politicians (Study 4). Strikingly, the explained variance amounted to 27.2% for the

Table 9 Predictors of whether polling is favored compared to talking to politicians at shopping malls or on the street

	Public	Journalists	Politicians
Education ^a	-.005	NA	NA
Age	.013	-.002	-.014*
Female	.049	.108	-.310*
Party registration (ref. Republican)			
Independent	.002	.399	.490**
Democrat	.074	.465	.488**
Political Ideology (ref. conservative)			
Moderate	-.057	-.344	-.538**
Liberal	.080	-.465	-.499*
Survey value	.136***	.467***	.227**
R ²	.077	.139	.114
(n)	914	241	261

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Note. OLS regression models are based on the *difference* in ratings (see Table 6) between “conducting a public opinion poll” and “talking to people at shopping malls or on the street.” For instance, if a respondent answered the first question about polling with 4 “very good” and the second question about talking to politicians at shopping malls with 2 “not too good,” the resulting value on the dependent variable would be $4 - 2 = +2$. In contrast, if a respondent would rate polls as 1 “not at all good” and talking to politicians at shopping malls as 3 “good,” a value of $1 - 3 = -2$ would be assigned.

^a Education was not available (NA) for Study 3 and 4.

Data sources: Studies 2 to 4, Kaiser 2001 (General Population, Expert Samples Journalists and Politicians)

public, 39.3% for journalists, and 34.8% for politicians, suggesting strong explanatory models.

Our data also allowed us to compare the relative attention the various groups believe that policymakers should pay to polling, compared to more informally talking with people in shopping malls and on streets, a policy input method that can be considered to be less comprehensive and scientific, although which some will argue to be more direct and more authentic (see Table 9). That comparison showed that for all three groups the perceived value of surveys had a significant effect on the difference between the answers, meaning that members of the public, journalists, and politicians who perceived surveys as more valuable thought also that they were a preferred method compared to more direct discussions with people at shopping

malls or on the street. Solely for politicians, demographics, party registration and political ideology had a significant impact, in addition to their perceptions of polling. Specifically, only Independents and Democrats preferred polling over direct interactions at shopping malls and on the street.

With respect to our second research question about preferences of the two expert groups, the results suggest that the views of the public, journalists, and politicians are relatively similar. Yet, with respect to perceptions of public opinion polling, we found that both expert groups—journalists and politicians—believed that polling has more impact within the democratic process than does the public, which provides support for the legitimization hypothesis.

Further analyses of why town hall meetings are often preferred over public opinion polls by the public but not by elites (see ranking in Table 6) showed that all three groups (public, journalists, and politicians) believe that “polls don’t give people the opportunity to say what they really think on an issue” (see Row 1 in Table A.3). Town hall meetings, on the other hand, provide the opportunity of in-depth expression of political positions. Yet, the more negative perception of polls by members of the public compared to elites is likely also grounded in the belief that polling is not always “based on sound scientific evidence” (see Row 2 in Table A.3).

Discussion

Summary of Results

Extending previous research on public representation (e.g., Burstein, 2003; Doherty et al., 2019; MacInnis, Anderson, & Krosnick, 2019), this study examines public preferences regarding the policy information process in the United States while emphasizing the role of public opinion polling as a policy input source for political decision-making. The preferences of the public appear to be contradictory since members of the public aspire to, on the one hand, having more political influence for the electorate, but prefer, on the other hand, direct contact with policymakers, which is less useful for providing politicians with a comprehensive view of public preferences. Specifically, the results disconfirm the democratic representation hypothesis regarding polling and indicate that a majority of the public prefer a direct public-policy link through channels such as town hall meetings rather than the mediated public-polling-policy link through public opinion research.

With respect to the question of who believes public opinion polls can provide a useful contribution to the democratic process, our study showed the expected influence for respondents who perceived surveys as a valuable tool. This finding highlights the importance of perceptions of surveys when understanding the role of

public opinion polling in the policy formation process (see De Leeuw et al., 2019; Gengler et al., 2019; Loosveldt & Storms, 2008; Stocké & Langfeldt, 2004).

Especially important from the perspective of actively engaging with society in order to educate people about surveys is the finding that perceptions of survey value appear to be a critical factor. This suggests that the educational efforts of professional public opinion research advocates may be well advised to focus at least as much on the societal value and impact of surveys as on their technical mastery. Building on that, combining surveys with other methods of democratic engagement (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999) might present a way to increase the value of surveys in the democratic process while at the same time offering political decision-makers a comprehensive view of the opinions of the public.

The preference of the public for alternative policy input sources other than polling may indicate that people do not think that standardized, indirect expression through surveys allows them to adequately contribute their opinion on (complex) policy issues. This interpretation is supported by the finding that the public did not think that polls provide the opportunity to say what they really think about an issue. At the same time, not all people think that polls are based on sound scientific methods. Consequently, preferences for alternative policy input sources are likely a mix of perceived shortcomings of polls and the limited role that polling is believed to play within the political decision-making process.

Besides the public opinion data examined, this analysis also included data from expert samples of politicians and journalists. In line with the citizen-elite congruence hypothesis (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001; André & Depauw, 2017), these additional data illustrated that all three groups see the policy formation process in a relatively consistent manner regarding the importance of various input sources. However, it also showed that public opinion polling as a policy input source was rated more favorably by the two expert groups than by the public. A possible reason for that is that both expert groups actually use public opinion polls for professional activities (legitimization hypothesis). While journalists use it for their news output, politicians rely on them as a source of policy input for their performance evaluation, and to actively shape public opinion (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Shapiro, 2011). Thus, attributing a larger impact to surveys legitimizes their professional attention to them.

When comparing perceptions of polling in the democratic process to less scientific input sources such as connecting with the public at shopping malls and on the streets, we found that members of each of the three groups (the public, journalists, and politicians) who perceive surveys as more valuable understandably also prefer polling as a policy input source. However, only for politicians did party registration and political ideology have an impact as well. Again, the comparison of polling with a less scientific policy input source suggests that the perceived value of

surveys appears to be most impactful when considering their democratic contribution.

Exploring the differences across party registration of politicians further, we found that especially Democrats and Independents perceived public opinion polls as the best option for the public to influence political decision making. In contrast, Republicans preferred alternative ways of public engagement. Those substantial differences across political party lines are likely to be even more visible today since American politics have become increasingly polarized (Alwin & Tufis, 2016).

Limitations

One limitation is that our data sets are from around 2000 and, therefore, about 20 years old. However, to our knowledge, no other available data allows the comparison of public perceptions of polling as a policy input source with other policy inputs to those of policy elites such as journalists and politicians. Also, when comparing the findings of our study to reports from other more recent studies from Kantar in 2013 and McClatchy-Marist in 2017, public perceptions about politicians and polling appear to be comparable to our results. Specifically, the Kantar study illustrates that the public still believes the best approach for politicians to obtain input from the public is through town hall meetings (see Online Appendix Table A.4). And the McClatchy-Marist results show that the public does not think that they are well represented while at the same time trust in public opinion polling remains low (see Tables A.5 and A.6). These two data sets are not publicly available and we were unable to access them, so we could not include either in the analyses reported here.

Another limitation, which is connected to the date of data collection, is that new developments in technology and communication are not included. One might think that the introduction of social media may have introduced an essential source of public engagement to the democratic process. However, again the Kantar study suggests that interaction via social media using Facebook or Twitter is considered the least optimal way for politicians to receive valuable policy input (see Table A.4).

A third limitation is that Study 3, the journalists data set, only includes a small number of Republicans and Conservatives. Thus, the results regarding political orientations of journalists should be treated with the necessary caution. Considering that we found substantial party differences regarding perceptions of the role of polling for politicians, the sample composition may have influenced the overall results for journalists in the direction of a more positive view toward public opinion polling.

Finally, limitations of the secondary data sources employed prevent the assessment of other potential explanations for the observed polling paradox. It may be, for example, that citizens who are more actively engaged – those who regularly vote, who attend rallies or town hall meetings, who contact their elected repre-

sentatives, and/or who more closely monitor public events – see greater value in these approaches, relative to passive reliance on public opinion polling, as the more effective means for influencing public policy. The data sets examined in this paper unfortunately do not include the engagement indicators necessary to explore this possibility. Future research will thus need to address this question.

Conclusion

Our study shows significant differences between ideal and perceived public representation within the political system of the United States. Considering our findings, polling appears to be a straightforward and democratic way that policymakers can increase their attentiveness to public preferences. However, while this view is shared by most politicians (i.e., Democrats and Independents) and journalists, many members of the public paradoxically believe that more direct approaches to engaging with policymakers through town hall meetings and through similar channels are the preferred approach to informing policy decisions. Yet, if at all, the merit of public opinion polling within the democratic process is favored by those people who perceive polls as valuable and have trust in them. Consequently, efforts to improve the public's perceptions about polling might be best advised to educate people about the function and contribution of polling within the democratic process. Ideally, this would include joint activities of public opinion researchers with journalists and politicians who appreciate the deliberative function of polling within democracies.

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