

THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC OPINION

PolicyMatters editor Sarah Tahamont interviews Peter D. Hart

Peter D. Hart is one of the leading analysts of public opinion in the United States. As an established leader in survey research, Mr. Hart has been a pollster for NBC News and The Wall Street Journal, represented more than 40 U.S. senators and 30 governors, ranging from Hubert Humphrey and Lloyd Bentsen, to Jay Rockefeller and Bob Graham. The National Journal named Mr. Hart to its select list of 150 national leaders who shape federal government policy, characterizing him as “probably the foremost Washington pollster for the Democratic Party and its centrist candidates, who plays a key role in identifying and shaping national trends and political messages.”

NATIONAL POLLING

ST: *Americans have very different perspectives in different parts of the nation. How do you run an effective national poll? Take a meaningful sample?*

PH: A simple way of trying to describe this would be the same as having a huge vat of minestrone soup. What we try and do is stir the soup all around so that all the vegetables, all the beans and all the broth are indeed mixed throughout and then we will take a large ladle and that will tell us how that soup is and what it is going to taste like. Or with a blood test obviously one does not take all the blood in one’s body, but takes just a little vial full to be able to determine your health or various illnesses. What we are trying to do is the exact same thing, which is to make sure we have an accurate cross-section of the electorate, that every registered voter has an equal chance as every other registered voter of falling into the sample. So it is indeed making sure that it is stratified by region, by state, by community, etc. before we begin the interviewing process.

ST: *What are some of the tactics you use to accomplish this?*

PH: Basically, after we’ve done the statistics to get us to a particular area, then we take all of the exchanges in the area and use a random-digit-dial method to give every household a chance of falling into our sample. Then once we’ve done that, we actually make the calls. When we get somebody in the household, we don’t necessarily interview the person who answers the phone; we have a method to randomize the respondents within the household.

ST: *Some parties and some states have closed primaries. Others allow voters to choose which party’s candidate(s) to vote for on Election Day. How do your polling methods change to account for these different policies?*

PH: They change dramatically because when a party has a closed primary we often work off a list of those people who are registered and eligible to vote. At that stage we know exactly who is at least eligible and then we have to determine the

likelihood of their voting. When we are in an open primary situation, we have to phone everybody to be able to find out the likelihood of various people’s voting. In that instance, obviously, we have to use a broader set of screening criteria, but in the end our objective is to find out who are the likely voters and to make sure they get included in the sample, while those people who are either unregistered or uninterested are excluded from the sample.

ST: *Many pollsters argue that their results are just positive data, and that people shouldn’t read too much into them. How would you suggest policymakers view public opinion polls? What is the biggest mistake or misinterpretation you see by lawmakers who cite polling data?*

PH: Good question, full question, difficult question. Simply put, polls are a measurement at a point in time. Some attitudes don’t change for many, many years; other attitudes change very quickly on issues, especially those that are in the public forefront. We can go in and measure people’s attitudes and within a couple of weeks those attitudes may change based on the conditions. People’s attitudes about energy prices or taxes might indeed change dramatically depending on the debate, what’s covered in the media, and what is happening. Our objective is, obviously, to design questions that are not just simply aimed to measure what is happening at this moment, but to provide for our clients a way of really understanding both the dynamics of what is happening and also the kind of obstacles and challenges that may arise as they move forward dealing with those issues.

When it comes to the biggest mistake, I think that several things happen. Number one, people think that these results are set in stone, and there is a tendency to miss the dynamism that is in public opinion and how it moves and changes. The second thing is that I think people get enamored with a single number as a way to analyze public policy issues, when you need to be able to look at various parts of the data from viewpoints across the spectrum. Third, I think there is a tendency to fall in love with numbers that reinforce an individual’s point of

view instead of looking at all the numbers and recognizing that people have contradictory opinions, but they are still really trying to tell you something about how they work through an issue.

ISSUE POLLING

ST: *One of the things that is interesting about issue polling is that many people consistently rank issues as principally important, but after elections these aren't the issues that are decisive (e.g. healthcare.) How useful are issue polls in determining what decides an election?*

PH: It depends upon what kind of an election. I always think that in elections for executive office (whether it be mayor, governor, or president) people are more likely to make their decisions based on personal traits. The reason is that it is almost a gut-level decision that people go through. Do I feel comfortable with that person? Do I trust that person? Do I feel that person is competent? All of those things play a role. It is not that issues aren't important—it is that these other elements tend to override issues in this instance.

ST: *So you are saying that a candidate's favorability matters more than the issues s/he runs on?*

PH: Well, I'm saying that may be true for executive offices. If it is a US Senate office or any time it is the legislative branch, I think issues tend to play a much more important part, because I think people recognize that those individuals are going to be casting a vote for me or against me. And in that instance, I'm going to vote on the basis of how I feel about that person's record and positions.

NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

ST: *The Democratic candidates have employed two very different dominant campaign strategies. Even though the candidates employ all campaign strategies, Obama seems to be running a heavily grassroots person-to-person campaign in contrast to Clinton's more media-heavy campaign. Which do you think is more effective?*

PH: Both, and it depends upon the situation. If Barack Obama becomes the nominee, I think we'll look back on 2008 and talk about it as a transcendent election. It is transcendent in terms of involvement, it's transcendent in terms of the use of the media, and it's transcendent in terms of the ability to organize caucus-goers and caucus participants. All of those things have really changed whatever the previous formula was. I think that it is often said that to be a leader a man must understand himself and understand the times. Clearly, I think Barack Obama has proved that he understands the times. He understands the times in terms of the technology, and he understands the times in terms of the philosophy and the message that he is delivering to the American public.

ST: *And if Clinton prevails?*

PH: Senator Clinton has several things going for her. First and foremost, it is a great Democratic year and I think she can build on the need for change, she can build on the need to figure out a different policy in Iraq, and I think she can build upon what I think will be an excessively weak economy. Beyond that, there is a sense of experience, competence, and compassion that comes through. And I think all of those things end up working for her.

I think 2008 is a very challenging year if you are a Republican, especially if you are the nominee of the Republican Party for president. Hillary Clinton may have some individual challenges, and there are going to be some people who just don't like her who are going to select John McCain. But the other side of it is that I think her sense of experience, wisdom and a sense of issue importance all will play to her advantage.

ST: *It seems like one of the major successes of the Clinton campaign so far is the ability to push the electorate to make a choice in her favor in the final hours before voting. Part of this can certainly be attributed to her willingness and ability to go negative. Why does negative campaigning work? People don't like candidates who go negative, but negative campaigning works – why?*

PH: Negative campaigning has gotten tremendous results over the past quarter-century. Sometimes it just astounds me how effective negative campaigning is, which means that people need a lot more information. When people are less well informed, they are more likely to be swayed by new information that comes to them. That information can be in the form of a television ad, a speech, or a series of press releases that tell you something about a person whom you don't know that well.

For Hillary Clinton's campaign I think that what they have been able to do in the primaries as opposed to the caucuses is to be able to create doubts and uncertainty about Barack Obama in the final hours of the campaign. I think it was effectively done in part in New Hampshire, certainly in Texas and Ohio, when they ran the 3 a.m. spot. It is asking: "Can I trust this person? Is he going to be safe?" I think the Clinton campaign was very effective in exploiting this sentiment.

ST: *I hear you drawing a distinction between the effectiveness of negative campaigning in a primary voting situation vs. a caucus. Do you think negative campaigning is less effective in a caucus system?*

PH: I think the important thing about the caucus is that Barack Obama understood the importance and the power of organizing. His effectiveness there, I think, became self-reinforcing as people would arrive at the caucus and see so many of their neighbors and friends there. And I think it is harder to do negative campaigning in a caucus because a caucus is a more personal and up-close experience, whereas voting is a more impersonal, non-threatening situation.