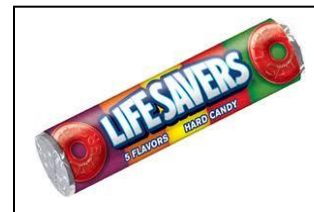


## Mitchell's Musings 6-30-14: The Hole in the Middle

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When I was growing up, there was an ad on the radio for Life Savers (candy) about the hole in the middle.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays there seems to be a hole in the middle of the attitudinal spectrum on how things are going in the U.S. The Field Poll, which measures such things in California, shows a hole in the middle, despite all the political talk for doing good deeds for the middle class. In prior musings, I have been critical of poll results when they refer to detailed questions of public policy. But when it comes to general attitudes, the critique doesn't apply. Presumably, most respondents have views – misinformed, uninformed or not – about how “things” are going.

So let's look at the latest Field Poll below which asks California registered voters whether the U.S. is going on the right track or on the wrong track (whatever that might mean) and about attitudes towards President Obama.<sup>2</sup> Folks seem to see the President as in charge of the country and thus presumably responsible for whether things are going well or not. (We'll come back to the italicized figures later.)

	<\$20K	\$20-39K	\$40-59K	\$60-79K	\$80-99K	\$100+K
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US Right						
Direction	32.6%	31.3%	40.8%	<b>27.6%</b>	<b>31.0%</b>	37.4%
<i>Calif better</i>	<i>36.4</i>	<i>38.7</i>	<i>30.1</i>	<i>44.0</i>	<i>42.0</i>	<i>47.3</i>
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US Wrong						
Track	45.6	51.9	45.8	<b>65.8</b>	54.9	52.9
<i>Calif worse</i>	<i>5.7</i>	<i>12.5</i>	<i>12.5</i>	<i>7.9</i>	<i>11.1</i>	<i>9.8</i>
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	Less Than High School	Just High School	Some College/Trade School	College Grad	Post-Grad	
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US Right						
Direction	32.6%	31.9	<b>27.4</b>	35.9	41.8	
<i>Calif better</i>	<i>31.4</i>	<i>42.4</i>	<i>36.4</i>	<i>40.2</i>	<i>46.2</i>	
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US Wrong						
Track	42.6	<b>53.4</b>	<b>59.8</b>	<b>52.2</b>	41.7	
<i>Calif worse</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>11.6</i>	<i>11.2</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>8.5</i>	
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Note: Figures do not sum to 100. Balance – not shown – is “don't know” or “refused.”

<sup>1</sup> I found someone else's memory of the ad on the web which I have modified with my own memory: “Why do they call 'em Life Savers? Because of the hole in the middle. And why put the hole in the middle? Because they call 'em Life Savers. You're going around in circles! So do Life Savers! Oh, nonsense. No, five cents.” I found this reference at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/816903/posts?page=533> in the comment section.

<sup>2</sup> The questions are 1) “Thinking about the country overall, do you think things in the U.S. are generally going in the right direction, or do you feel things are seriously off on the wrong track?”

2) “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as President?” Source via the *Sacramento Bee*: <http://media.sacbee.com/smedia/2014/06/23/18/09/O8Dal.So.4.pdf> and <http://media.sacbee.com/smedia/2014/06/23/18/11/1ibDgv.So.4.pdf>

Measured by income, there seems to be angst about the U.S. direction that starts at about a household income of \$60,000 (roughly the California median household income<sup>3</sup>) and ends at \$100,000+ for on the right track and somewhat lower measured by wrong track. When we look at educational attainment – the median attainment is some college (but not a 4-year degree) or trade school – the hole in the middle falls in the high school-to-some college/trade school range. The same hole is seen in the Obama approval-disapproval ratings. In short, some of the folks in the middle – or at least those who vote – are especially unhappy.

	<\$20K	\$20-39K	\$40-59K	\$60-79K	\$80-99K	\$100+K
Obama Approve	51.7%	51.8%	<b>46.9%</b>	<b>43.6%</b>	<b>47.8%</b>	52.5%
Obama Disapprove	29.9	35.9	<b>40.6</b>	<b>50.2</b>	<b>45.4</b>	38.1
	Less Than High School	Just High School	Some College/Trade School	College Grad	Post-Grad	
Obama Approve	62.1%	<b>40.6</b>	<b>44.0</b>	50.8	61.7	
Obama Disapprove	28.2	<b>44.2</b>	<b>44.9</b>	37.3	29.4	

Note: Figures do not sum to 100. Balance – not shown – is “don’t know” or “refused.”

An interesting question is whether their unhappiness is just a projection of their own immediate expected experience or whether there is some kind of longer-run concern about the more abstract state of the nation, now and in the future. The Field Poll asks respondents about their personal immediate expectations: *Looking ahead, do you think that a year from now you will be better off financially, worse off, or just about the same as now?*<sup>4</sup> Their responses to that question are shown in italics on the previous page.

The hole-in-the-middle phenomenon does not show up in the short-term personal projections. In fact, registered voters in all groups show a striking *lower* propensity to think that they will be worse off a year from now than think the U.S. is going in the wrong direction. So whatever it is that is bugging the middle class seems to be more general than personal economics. It seems more akin to President Carter’s famous (or infamous) “malaise” than to something that can be addressed by some contemporary policy shift (such as the Affordable Care Act or raising the minimum wage).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The California median household income was \$58,328 in 2012 and so should be nominally somewhat higher in 2014, particularly among voters. See <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acsbr12-02.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://media.sacbee.com/smedia/2014/06/25/17/17/CUbOB.So.4.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106508243>.

One suspects that what has developed is a perception that key institutions are not functional. A gridlocked Congress, a war in Iraq that did not work out as planned, a sluggish recovery from the Great Recession, the Great Recession itself, the 2001 terrorist attacks, etc., all have contributed to a sense that something is wrong. The sense of dysfunction may go back all the way to Watergate and the Vietnam War. There seem to be no great national projects that are succeeding. As an example, unlike the Kennedy administration's put-a-man-on-the-Moon space program, the U.S. now depends on Russian(!) rockets to take astronauts into space. It seems more likely that the next person on the Moon will be a Chinese "taikonaut" rather than an American astronaut. Closer to home, the major interstate highway construction program of the 1950s and 1960s stands in contrast to the aging infrastructure in need of maintenance and repair that exists as a legacy of that program today.

Conventional wisdom has it that political candidates should talk about social programs (either for or against) and divisive social issues. Such issues are seen as the way to attract voters who fall in the hole in the middle. But maybe what is needed instead is a challenging (and successful) Grand Project. Will there be a presidential aspirant in 2016 who will sound more like Kennedy and less like the typical contemporary candidate? We're waiting for him or her to appear.