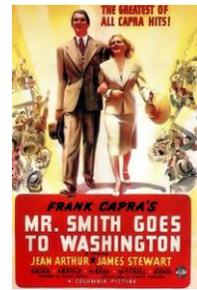


Mitchell's Musings 7-7-14: All Incomes Are Not Created Equal

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Our prior musing dealt with results from the California Field Poll on how folks felt about the general state of affairs in the U.S. As noted in that musing, polls are suspect when they get into detailed questions about specific public policies. Typically in those cases, pollsters have to explain the policy because most people don't follow such matters in detail. The ways in which the explanations and questions are presented have a major impact on the responses. However, when the questions are general, attitudes are likely to be reasonably detected.

Table 1 on the final page of this musing shows the results concerning attitudes about income inequality among the California adult population.¹ A majority of adults are dissatisfied with income inequality. But beyond that simple observation, there are surprises. Immigrants, who are often at the lower end of the income distribution (especially Latinos), are less worried about income inequality than other adults. Presumably, the still-lower income level alternatives in their native countries influence the responses. Strongly conservative and strongly liberal respondents are more concerned about inequality than others so both (extreme) sides of the political spectrum are more concerned than centrists. Young people (age 18-29) are less worried about it – despite their well-publicized job problems, issues of college debt, etc. – than are other adults. Lower income respondents are less dissatisfied about inequality than others.

I came across this poll a few days ago. More recently, a reference appeared in the *Huffington Post*, ostensibly about what amounts to a push-poll aimed at showing that people generally (not just in California) are fed up with “government.”² Despite the pushiness of the poll, I have no doubt – based on the better poll discussed in our prior musing – that there is much concern about the overall state of affairs. The object of the poll discussed in the *Huffington Post* was to support a new political movement to be termed “We Need Smith,” a reference to the old (1939) Frank Capra Hollywood film “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.” In that film an ordinary man is selected as a U.S. senator and confronts the political obstructions of the era.³ Although almost defeated by corruption, he is vindicated of false charges and his efforts in the Senate to push construction of a camp for boys advance.

¹The public media release is at <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/RIs2475.pdf>. Additional detail is at <http://media.sacbee.com/smedia/2014/07/01/17/09/1tbsVB.So.4.pdf>.

²http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/03/we-need-smith_n_5554830.html. A link to the poll is in the article.

³Plot summary of “Smith” from imdb.com: *The governor of an unnamed western state, Hubert "Happy" Hopper (Guy Kibbee), has to pick a replacement for recently deceased U.S. Senator Sam Foley. His corrupt political boss, Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), pressures Hopper to choose his handpicked stooge, while popular committees want a reformer. The governor's children want him to select Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), the head of the Boy Rangers. Unable to make up his mind between Taylor's stooge and the reformer, Hopper decides to flip a coin. When it lands on edge and next to a newspaper story on one of Smith's accomplishments he chooses Smith, calculating that his wholesome image will please the people while his naïveté will make him easy to manipulate. Smith is taken under the wing of the publicly esteemed, but secretly crooked, Senator Joseph Paine (Claude Rains), who was Smith's late father's oldest and best friend, and he develops an immediate attraction to the senator's daughter, Susan (Astrid Allwyn). The unforgiving Washington press quickly labels Smith a bumpkin, with no business being a senator. Paine, to keep Smith busy, suggests he propose a bill. Smith comes up with legislation that would authorize a federal*

Although “Mr. Smith” has a satisfying Hollywood ending, the notion that generalized dissatisfaction can be harnessed in some predictable way is an illusion. Hollywood produced another Frank Capra film – “Meet John Doe” (1941) – which may be more to the point.⁴ (Both “Smith” and “Doe” are available on YouTube in full and for free.) In the “Doe” case, an ordinary man runs for President, backed by a group that expects to control him. They see him as an appealing front man. But the scheme goes awry. The film has a more ambiguous ending than “Smith.”⁵ While the bad guys are ultimately unable to use the

government loan to buy some land in his home state for a national boys' camp, to be paid back by youngsters across America. Donations pour in immediately. However, the proposed campsite is already part of a dam-building graft scheme included in a Public Works bill framed by the Taylor political machine and supported by Senator Paine. Unwilling to crucify the worshipful Smith so that their graft plan will go through, Paine tells Taylor he wants out, but Taylor reminds him that Paine is in power primarily through Taylor's influence. Through Paine, the machine accuses Smith of trying to profit from his bill by producing fraudulent evidence that Smith owns the land in question. Smith is too shocked by Paine's betrayal to defend himself and runs away. However, Smith's chief of staff, Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur), has come to believe in him, and talks him into launching a filibuster to postpone the Works bill and prove his innocence on the Senate floor just before the vote to expel him. While Smith talks non-stop, his constituents try to rally around him, but the entrenched opposition is too powerful, and all attempts are crushed. Due to influence of the Taylor "machine", on his orders, newspapers and radio stations in Smith's home state refuse to report what Smith has to say and even twist the facts against the Senator. An effort by the Boy Rangers to spread the news results in vicious attacks on the children by Taylor's minions. Although all hope seems lost, the senators begin to pay attention as Smith approaches utter exhaustion. Paine has one last card up his sleeve: he brings in bins of letters and telegrams from Smith's home state from people demanding his expulsion. Nearly broken by the news, Smith finds a small ray of hope in a friendly smile from the President of the Senate (Harry Carey). Smith vows to press on until people believe him, but immediately collapses in a faint. Overcome with guilt, Paine leaves the Senate chamber and attempts to kill himself with a gun. When he is stopped, he bursts back into the Senate chamber, loudly confesses to the whole scheme, and affirms Smith's innocence.

⁴ The “Doe” film – including a suicide element in the plot – appears to be inspired by California’s pensionite and other political movements of the 1930s.

⁵Plot from imdb.com: *When reporter ANN MITCHELL is laid off by managing editor HENRY CONNELL because of streamlining, she begs to stay on since she's supporting her MOTHER and TWO SISTERS, but it's no use. Angry, she gathers up her belongings but then, as a parting shot, types up a fake letter from "John Doe" stating that he's so downtrodden by the unfairness of things that he intends jumping off the building on Christmas Eve. The paper prints the letter and it causes a sensation. Everyone relates to and wants to help John Doe. Connell, desperate to get hold of the original letter is shocked when Ann tells him there was no letter. Connell, angry, is ready to print a retraction but Ann suggests that they hire a "fake John Doe" to embody the pathos of the letter. She gets her job back along with a lucrative fee and contract. Several desperate MEN line up claiming to have written the letter, so Ann and Connell must now pick the one. When handsome JOHN WILLOUGHBY walks in, Ann's clearly smitten. A likeable, quiet baseball player who's fallen on bad times, John's the one who will become "John Doe." Although he seems too honest to lie, Ann believes he's desperate enough. They create a fake letter; put him up at a fancy hotel with bodyguards, making him sign an agreement. Also in tow (much to Connell's chagrin) is THE COLONEL, a confirmed vagabond, distrustful of society, who warns John that he's falling into a trap of privilege. Next come publicity photos, which are directed by Ann to get the correct "angry protest" look. With headlines proclaiming his anger at the unfairness of the world, John becomes an increasing media sensation, courtesy of hyperbolic headlines concocted by Connell. Meanwhile, the GOVERNOR suspects John Doe is a myth but mistakenly feels it was concocted by publisher B. D. NORTON to discredit him. Ann convinces Norton to play it for what it's worth. Norton offers her money to write radio speeches to sell Doe. He also wants her to work directly with him and not Connell. Ann goes to work, typing up a storm but nothing comes to mind. Ann's Mother suggests that she write something upbeat and simple, using the values of Ann's late father as an inspiration. By now, John has begun realizing that his baseball career might not get started again if the John Doe business is revealed as a phony. Nonetheless, John reads his first manufactured upbeat speech, written by Ann to a packed house. Ann coaches him to be sincere, suggesting that she's fallen in love with John Doe. The speech, broadcast on the radio, stirs the people with its "love thy neighbor"-style message. CROWDS love him but John can't get away fast enough. He and the Colonel resort to the boxcars and flee. B. D. Norton, thinking he was great, wants him located. When a DINER WAITER recognizes him, John's hope for a return to normalcy is squelched by sudden CROWDS, eager to meet him. Ann and Norton locate him. John isn't happy about it. When Norton offers him a lecture tour, he refuses it angrily. When the common PEOPLE who have a "John Doe" club talk to him, however, he softens when hearing how he's touched them. Now, John's torn. His itinerant pal, The Colonel, thinks he's been "hooked" and, disgusted, walks out on him. Norton arranges the lecture tour. John speaks in state after state, addressing the many national clubs in his name. Connell tells Norton, however, that he's curious why Norton is spending so much money on the tour. In the meantime, Ann, knowing that John now likes her, feels increasingly like the heel she feels she is. She feels even worse when John relates a tender dream that he had about her and talks to her about how he relates to the lonely, hungry people to whom he's been speaking. Norton gives Ann a fur coat and a gift. He then tells her that he*

ordinary man for their nefarious purposes (the Hollywood code of that era prevails), the film ends with a vague promise that maybe someday things will be better.

So what lesson should we take away from the films? It isn't that good eventually triumphs over evil ("Smith") and the needs of the ordinary person will prevail. It is that mobilizing generalized discontent can indeed produce political consequences. But the notion that either groups on the left or the right can predictably use discontent and control it for their own agendas is an illusion. And the results you get may not be happy endings. Indeed, there may be no results at all ("Doe") or worse. If you want to be worried about growing inequality and generalized loosely-related anxiety about how "things" are going, that should be your concern. Ultimately, the political system may respond badly or not at all.



wants John Doe to announce a new "third political party," which, it's clear to Ann, was Norton's plan all along. Norton wants to be the presidential candidate for that party, which will be less for the people than it is for those like Norton - big business types. John visits Ann's Mother, telling her he'd like to marry Ann. Her gentle advice is just to ask. While John talks with Connell, the editor, who's had a few drinks, blurts that Norton has a dark agenda. John feels hurt and used, as he'd felt the whole John Doe was legitimate, not a tool for Norton's political ambitions. Connell also tells John how well paid Ann is to write the speeches and would do anything for money. Angry, John walks in on Norton and Ann at a lavish dinner party he's having in his mansion. John overhears Norton's political plotting as well as his toast to Ann for having aided him. Ann sees that John is listening. John asks Ann if indeed she wrote Norton's speech and she admits it. John then confronts Norton and all at his party. John threatens to thwart his efforts. Norton accuses John of being the fake, not him. Norton threatens to reveal such if he talks. Aghast that Norton would kill the John Doe movement to protect his own interests, John is furious with all of them. He tells them off with passion, impressing Ann and the STAFF, who overhear. John feels that the movement is far too powerful for Norton and his cronies to stop. Norton wants John stopped before he can blow the whistle at the huge gathering that has now formed at a public arena. Ann catches up with John, trying to explain, telling him that she didn't know what Norton and his people were doing. John doesn't believe her and doesn't allow her to accompany him in his cab. John shows up at the event as a huge CROWD stands in the rain singing the National Anthem. A PRIEST introduces John. Before he can speak, Norton has published a report that John Doe is a fake. Norton's TROOPERS storm the event as John tries to get the mob's attention and speak. With John subdued, Norton takes the mike and accuses him of being a fraud. As John tries to speak, the Troopers cut the mike cords. Ann listens on the radio as the mob becomes unruly. John returns to his place beneath a bridge with The Colonel. Newspapers herald his fakery. Clubs disband. John feels disgraced. He's tortured by memories of the sweet, simple people that he feels he now let down. Christmas Eve comes, the appointed time that John Doe was to take his life by leaping from the building. Some of his FOLLOWERS are convinced he'll jump, so they head for the roof, as does Ann. Indeed, John shows up, a letter in his hand addressed to the admirers he feels he let down. He's about to jump when Norton steps from the shadows with his MEN, telling him that if he jumps the mayor has been instructed to remove his i.d. and thus his suicide will be for nothing. But John tells him he's already mailed a copy of the letter elsewhere. John's glad they're here. He tells Norton that the movement that they killed will be born all over again. Ann shows up as he's about to jump, begging him not to do it. She insists they can start it over again together. His followers agree. John and Ann walk away. Connell gets in the last word with a thwarted Norton.

Table 1
Satisfaction with the way income and wealth in California is distributed
(among California adults)

	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	No opinion
Total adults	38%	54	8
Party identification			
Democrats	37%	54	9
Republicans	37%	54	9
Independents	44%	48	8
Political ideology			
Strongly conservative	31%	56	13
Moderately conservative	49%	45	6
Middle-of-the-road	37%	55	8
Moderately liberal	38%	57	5
Strongly liberal	28%	65	7
Place of birth			
U.S.	32%	60	8
Non-U.S.	50%	40	10
Race/ethnicity			
White non-Hispanic	30%	61	9
Latino (total)	46%	47	7
U.S. born	42%	53	5
Not born in U.S.	52%	41	7
African American [†]	35%	63	2
Asian American	47%	37	16
Gender			
Male	41%	50	9
Female	35%	56	9
Age			
18-29	47%	47	6
30-39	37%	58	5
40-49	40%	56	4
50-64	33%	55	12
65 or older	33%	51	16
Household income			
Less than \$20,000	42%	50	8
\$20,000-\$39,999	40%	50	10
\$40,000-\$59,999	39%	53	8
\$60,000-\$99,999	29%	64	7
\$100,000 or more	36%	57	7