

Mitchell's Musings 7-9-12: Creating a Train of Thought

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We all know about “push polls” that appear whenever there is a political campaign. A push poll consists of a phone call to a voter, ostensibly to ask neutral survey questions, but actually composed of questions formatted to point to a particular position or candidate (or – more often – away from a particular position or candidate). The sad fact is, however, that even reputable polls inadvertently are pushers since many voters don't focus on the issues or the candidates until close to Election Day.

Particularly when complex issues are involved, therefore, voters either are unaware of the issues entirely or have only vague notions about them. Almost any question – to prompt respondents to say more than “don't know” or “no opinion” provides information to the respondents about the issue. The presentation of the information to poll respondents who really don't know or who really have no opinion tends to frame an issue. The subtle message is that you should have an opinion.

Here is a recent example. The Field Poll is a longstanding, respected poll on politics and attitudes in California. But, as will be described below, it (inadvertently most probably) became a pusher.

As in many states, California was hard hit by the Great Recession. In addition, in the period just prior to the Great Recession, the state's fiscal affairs were not in order so the recession intensified an already-existing problem. California was also disproportionately a participant in the housing bubble and flaky mortgages that precipitated the Great Recession so it was disproportionately affected by the downturn.

Fast forward to the present. Governor Jerry Brown has placed an initiative on the November 2012 ballot that would provide a temporary increase in the income and sales taxes. There is a long story behind the development of that initiative which is unnecessary to explore here. The key point is that the governor's remedy for California's fiscal distress is voter approval of the tax initiative in the upcoming general election. So it is natural that the Field Poll would be asking questions about voter intentions regarding the initiative.¹

Another current political development in the state is a proposal for the building of a high-speed rail system that would run from southern to northern California. Voters approved a bond

¹ The Field Poll to which this musing refers can be found at <http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/Rls2413.pdf>.

measure to begin the project in 2009, but other fiscal actions must occur before the actual construction can begin. Governor Brown supports the rail proposal and on July 6 managed to obtain legislative approval by a very narrow vote. No aspect of the rail proposal, however, will be on the ballot in November.

The rail project has been controversial, hence the narrow legislative vote. Naturally, the Field Poll wanted to examine public attitudes towards the rail proposal. So the latest Field Poll, which was mainly about the governor’s tax initiative, nonetheless included the following question:

If the legislature were to approve initial state funding for the high-speed rail project this year, would this make you more likely or less likely to support Governor Brown's tax increase initiative in the November general election or wouldn't this make any difference to you?

Note that the question is overtly neutral. It raises the possibility that the rail proposal, if enacted, could make voters more or less receptive to the tax initiative or have no effect. The problem is that by asking the question, the poll suggested to respondents that there was a rail-to-tax connection, i.e., voter/respondents should consider a) how they stand on the rail proposal and b) then take that stance and relate it to what they intend to do on the tax initiative. Yes, voter/respondents could entertain the possibility that it would have no effect on their voting yea or nay on taxes. But the question inherently plants the seed of a connection.

What did voters say? The table below from the poll media release summarizes the results:

How legislative approval of funds for the high-speed rail project affects voter support for Governor Brown's tax increase initiative (among likely voters)

Impact on support for the Governor's initiative	Total likely voters	Current voting preference on Governor's initiative	
		Yes voter	No voter
Less likely to support	31%	21%	48%
No effect	54	59	45
More likely to support	11	17	5
No opinion	4	3	2

A majority of likely voters say the rail vote in the legislature would have no effect on their view of the tax proposal. But – with the seed of rail-tax connection planted – somewhat more say the rail enactment would make them less likely to support the tax than more. But the really lopsided tilt toward “less likely” is among those voters who intend already to vote against the tax. Among yes voters, there is a rough balance within the margin of error. And it might be

noted that the rail/tax question was only asked of a subsample of the poll's respondents, making the margin of error larger.

What was the result in the news media when the poll was released? The headlines were that the rail decision potentially imperiled the tax initiative. The headline below was typical. But really there is no evidence that there is much of a relation between the legislative action on the tax initiative, other than one created by the poll itself.

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Rail vote potential pitfall for Gov. Jerry Brown's tax initiative, Field Poll finds

By David Siders 20

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Gov. Jerry Brown is a big proponent of high-speed rail, but if the Legislature votes this week to fund the project, it could hurt him in the fall.

A survey released today suggests the project



FIELD POLL: TAX INCREASE INITIATIVES

A high-speed rail initiative could hurt Gov. Jerry Brown's tax initiative in the fall, a field poll found. About 60% of voters support the tax increase to fund high-speed rail, but 54% oppose the tax increase to fund high-speed rail.

Issue	Support	Oppose
High-speed rail	60%	39%
Tax increase to fund high-speed rail	54%	45%
High-speed rail	60%	39%
Tax increase to fund high-speed rail	54%	45%

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The California rail-tax poll “results” bring me to health care and the U.S. Supreme Court’s 5-4 decision upholding most of the Obama health insurance plan including the controversial individual mandate. The news media, electronic and print, couldn’t get enough of the story. How could anyone not know of the decision?

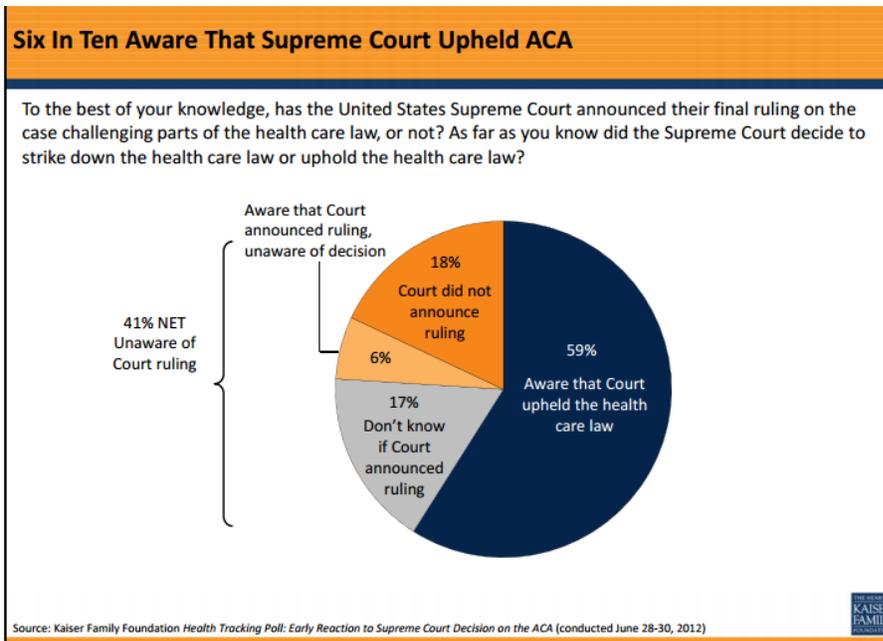
The New York Times

JUSTICES, BY 5-4, UPHOLD HEALTH CARE LAW; ROBERTS IN MAJORITY; VICTORY FOR OBAMA

G.O.P. Voting To Repeal Health Care Law

Obama's Young Pioneers Club

But the sad truth is that many people didn't know. Indeed, a poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that four out of ten did not know about the Supreme Court decision as of June 28-30.² (The decision was on June 28.) See below for the results:



If four out of ten did not know, how solid do you suppose was the information possessed by the other six? How strongly do you suppose many of them hold their opinions of the health plan? How much do they know about how the Supreme Court's decision will affect their voting behavior in the general election in November, four months from now?

Keep those questions in mind between now and November when you read about poll results regarding voting intentions and issues of controversy such as health care or jobs. Ignorance may not be bliss but it

² From the poll release: *This Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: Early Reaction to Supreme Court Decision on the ACA is the first of two polls to be released this month looking at public opinion on the Affordable Care Act in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in the case challenging the law. The poll was designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation led by Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., including Claudia Deane, Sarah Cho, and Theresa Boston. The survey was conducted June 28-30, 2012, among a nationally representative random digit dial telephone sample of 1,239 adults ages 18 and older, living in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii. Interviews conducted by landline (712) and cell phone (527, including 314 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish by Braun Research, Inc. under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI). The combined landline and cell phone sample was weighted to balance the sample demographics to match Census estimates for the national population on sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, nativity (for Hispanics only), region, and telephone usage... The release is at <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/8329-C.PDF>.*

is widespread. Polls that report opinions may have suggested what opinions are expected, however innocently.