



Newsletter

Public Opinion on Research & Policy by Daniel Savas

Spring 2010

Volume 5, Issue 1

Does public opinion research replace political leadership in shaping public policy, or is it a single tool among many used to inform public policy decision making? Having spent the better part of two decades in the polling business in British Columbia, working with governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations, I have found this question requires a more nuanced response. In my view, pollsters get a bad and largely unfair rap for unduly influencing public policy debates or the outcome of elections; we sit somewhere between plumbers and chiropractors on surveys of the reputation of professions. The reality is that public opinion research continues to serve a very useful purpose in public policy development. It is useful to remember that polls and public opinion research can actually democratize the policy development process. A good survey, artfully crafted to probe a properly designed scientific sampling of the general public, offers citizens an opportunity to have a voice in what policies are developed (or not developed). Passive citizenship – the silent majority – can often speak through polls. Governments often use polling to test the public opinion waters of several policy options. And, advocacy groups can mobilize public opinion by the strategic use of public opinion surveys. So, from this point of view, polling is really a prism through which governments and other stakeholders obtain a better view of the citizenry. How bad can that be?

It is often asserted, nonetheless, that public opinion research can supplant or become an excuse for a lack of political leadership in public policy development. It is true that what is the right thing to do from a policy perspective may not always survive politically because it cannot be “sold” to a sceptical, uninformed or resistant public, a public our leaders know all too much about because of their polling research. From this point of view, polling deserves the critics’ ire. However, is it all that surprising political leaders want to hold on to the reins of power, and use polls to gauge public opinion on policy in hope of doing so? Why would they not use all the tools at their disposal?

Still, in my view, polls don’t replace political leadership; rather they serve good leaders who already have an idea of what they want to do in a particular policy area. Good leaders don’t really depend so much on polls to make decisions about a policy direction; they use them to ensure they have “got it right”. It is the poor leaders without ideas who misuse and manipulate polls that give public opinion research a bad name.

At the end of the day, public opinion research offers multiple benefits to political leaders, policy makers, and the general public. It enhances democracy, provides insights into policy impacts and outcomes, and helps to hasten needed changes; public opinion research raises the policy bar. Used appropriately, it can provide a net benefit to the policy process.

Inside this issue:

Public Opinion on Research & Policy	1
From Co-Op to Capstone	2
Career in Public Policy	2
MPP Students in the News	3
Congratulations	3
YouthG8/G20 Summit	4



Daniel Savas is an Adjunct Professor in the Public Policy Program and the President of Savas Consulting. He is also a former Senior Vice-President of Ipsos Reid.

Editor: Dominique M. Gross
Assistant Editor: Dawn Geil

Co-op at TransLink by Mark Beaty (MPP 2010)

In my first year of the MPP program, I was introduced to a wide variety of areas under the umbrella of public policy. Having come to the program from music, it was somewhat of a surprise to discover that economics and transportation policy captured my attention more than anything else. Few policy areas are as directly connected to the



From Co-op

To Capstone

economy, the environment, and community livability as transportation policy.

I landed my summer co-op term with TransLink, working in the strategic planning and policy division. I learned a tremendous

amount about the complexity of regional decision-making (what's good for the region is not always good for one municipality or stakeholder), and I worked directly with the public consultation process for developing the 10-year plan. I learned a simple but difficult lesson: if politicians need public support for good policy

decisions, one of the greatest challenges for public policy is how to better engage and educate the public.

My capstone topic flowed directly from that experience as I explored public acceptance for road pricing. With the help of my colleagues at TransLink, I developed interviews with the public, local mayors and stakeholders to better understand the reasons behind public opposition to road pricing. My analysis revealed a number of causes such as misperceptions about the impacts of road pricing and the transportation funding system in general. My research came full circle from where I started with TransLink by recommending innovative public engagement strategies. Both the co-op at TransLink and my capstone project have been very useful experiences in preparing for work in the area of public policy.

Career in Public Policy by Marta Taylor (MPP 2009)

In April 2009 I finished the MPP program and began working as a Manager of Special Projects for the City of Port Moody. My position is funded through a three year pilot program of the Local Government Management Association (LGMA). In each of the three years, the LGMA and its partners fund five recent graduates to work as managers in different BC municipalities. The aim of the program is to highlight the career opportunities available in local government.

The broadness of my job title has proven appropriate, as I have undertaken a wide variety of assignments. To fulfill my mandate of understanding *all* operations of the City, I have

Name: Marta Taylor
Title: Manager, Special Projects, City of Port Moody
Location: Port Moody, BC
BA: Sociology, Simon Fraser University, 2005

led a corporate green team, hosted business guests during the Olympics in order to attract foreign investment, drafted resolutions for submission to the Union of BC Municipalities, and even inspected garbage carts for proper waste diversion. I have spent a significant amount of my time conducting analysis for various departments, writing reports, and drafting policies and bylaws.

One may not immediately link an MPP degree with work in local government. For small cities like Port Moody, there is no defined policy analyst position. However, this means that all managers and directors are put in the role of creating and evaluating policies. The skills I learned through the MPP program have proven very useful to my work, especially in regards to problem definition; framing; and inter-departmental, big picture analysis. I have applied my skills to issues such as property tax distribution, waste diversion, interactive government, corporate investment, and economic development. My work is engaging and challenging and I consider myself lucky to be working for such a great organization.

2nd Annual Simon Fraser University Public Policy Colloquium



Once again, the first year students undertook to advise the provincial government on six important long term policy issues. Topics ranged widely: 1) what to do next about housing the homeless in the downtown eastside; 2) how to increase voter turnout; 3) how to accelerate physician adoption of electronic records; 4) techniques to increase citizen engagement in policy; 5) how to expand the Act Now preventive health program; 6) improving "cradle-to-cradle" waste/toxin management in the forest sector.

This was a major component of the MPP807 policy course. In mid-April the entire class crossed over to Victoria to present PowerPoint "decks" and distribute their final reports at a day-long seminar in the Victoria Art Gallery. Students and interested provincial civil servants attended.

Organizing the seminar fell to Cecile Lacombe and her colleagues in the Ministry of Citizens' Services, and to Dawn Geil, MPP Manager. Professors John Richards and Nancy Olewiler offered encouragements and posed a few carefully crafted questions to stimulate the debate.

The Public Policy Program is No More!

We are now **The School of Public Policy**, approved by SFU's Board of Governors on April 23rd. The School will continue to offer the Masters in Public Policy degree program, and in addition we are exploring with partners from other departments at SFU the possibility of joint degrees in Health Policy and in Economic Policy. Stay tuned for updates to these potential new programs and other initiatives of our School.

Congratulations

- ◆ We are delighted to announce the appointment of two new faculty members to the School of Public Policy. SFU's incoming President, **Andrew Petter**, will be a member of the School. **Maureen Maloney** from the University of Victoria, Faculty of Law, will be joining us in **September 2010**.
- ◆ Prof. Jon Kesselman, in April, presented his research on "**Expanding Canada Pension Plan Retirement Benefits: Big CPP**" to a session of the **National Retirement Income Summit** sponsored by the University of Calgary School of Public Policy. The Summit was attended by the finance ministers of Canada, Ontario and Alberta along with pension policy scholars and practitioners.
- ◆ Prof. Judith Sixsmith is a co-investigator in an international research team who has been awarded \$25,000 by the **Canadian Institute of Health Research** on the basis of a letter of intent, to write a full proposal on **Mobility in Aging** by the 18th June 2010.

MPP Student Op-Eds

- ◆ Ginger Gosnell-Myers "**Ten years on, the Nisga'a face challenging Times**" Terrace Standard, March 23rd, 2010.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Simon Fraser University
Harbour Centre
515 West Hastings St.
Vancouver, BC V6B 5K3
Canada

Phone: 778-782-5289
Fax: 778-782-5288

www.sfu.ca/MPP

The Master's in Public Policy is a two-year innovative graduate program that emphasizes the development of techniques to **undertake** and **manage** public **policy analysis** and planning.

The mandate of the program is to provide a professional graduate education that yields public policy analysts and managers who can **scrutinize** a problem, **interpret** and **analyze** relevant data, then **evaluate** alternative paths of action. Graduates find employment in federal, provincial, and municipal governments, non-governmental organizations, crown corporations, and private-sector firms. The program offers expertise in labour markets, environment, social policy, trade policy, immigration, Canadian and international policy, First Nations research, land use, communications,

Youth G8/G20 Summit by Laura Spencer (MPP 2010)

This year's G8/G20 Summit is in our own country and the youth G8/G20 Summit 2010 is in our city. In fact, the event is even in the building where my fellow SFU Public Policy classmates and I attend our classes—at Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver.

What is the Youth G8/G20 Summit? It is a mock version of the real G8/G20 summit and is organized by YouthCan for International Dialogue. The Youth Summit remedies the lack of youth involvement through a mock version of the discussions and debates among hundreds of country representatives from the G20 countries, with each delegate a selected representative for one of the nine ministries. Students from all kinds of academic disciplines including sciences and engineering, all under the age of 30, are invited to participate in global discussions. This year's theme is "Global Transitions". The youth summit has the same agenda as the G8/G20 Summit with additional issues in foreign affairs, international health and defense. It mirrors real world summits by involving negotiations and decisions about policy recommendations that are innovative, creative and practical. The ultimate goal of the Summit is to produce a policy paper called *Communiqué* which reflects the values shared by youth.

I was accepted as the Canadian Minister of Development and together with the 19 other countries' Development Representatives we will attempt to develop effective international policy recommendations ranging from global poverty to education and based on persuasive evidence.

Similar to the real G8/G20 Summit, policy topics are discussed for 6 weeks prior to the summit via different communication tools. As the Minister of Development from the host country, I am the chair of the discussions with the other ministers and we must reach a consensus by the end of the summit after a week of in-person debates, on May 15th. At that point, a policy brief with an effective and punchy set of recommendations will be put forward with input from each ministry in the *Communiqué*. It will be sent for consideration to the world leaders attending the G8/G20 Summit to include youth perspectives.

I am especially looking forward to the Summit as by the time it starts I will just have completed the SFU Public Policy course on negotiations, which will come in time to sharpen my debating, mediating, and consensus building skills.
