

Where Do We Get Our Ideas? A Reply to Nelson Polsby*

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In 1991 the Kettering Foundation published a paper on Americans' attitudes toward politics and the political system in the United States today. The report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, was written by Richard Harwood and was based on focus group research Harwood conducted with ten groups composed of roughly twelve persons each. The report described Americans as frustrated with, angry about, and alienated from the political system and those who run it.

In "Where Do You Get Your Ideas?" (*PS*, March 1993), Nelson Polsby holds up *Citizens and Politics* as an example of how not to do social science and as a cautionary tale about the importance to a democratic society of vigilant political scientists ("alert watchers") who, constant in their rigorous fidelity to the standards and methods of scientific inquiry, stand between us and epistemological—perhaps even political—chaos. That a democratic society needs such persons I do not doubt, and I respect Polsby's commitment to the cause. It's not his intentions that I question, but rather his faith in the unique superiority of the particular standards and methods he recommends.

Polsby is surely correct about one thing: because qualitative research (of which focus groups are one kind) is open-ended and will be influenced by the experience and judgment of the researcher, there is always a risk that the results will appear to be those that the researcher wishes, albeit perhaps unconsciously, to obtain. Polsby is right to urge those who encounter such results to treat them cautiously, taking care not to accept them at face value. This is good advice when approaching any qualitative research, whether based on participant-observation, case studies, one-on-one in-depth interviews, or focus groups. The danger

that one who employs such methods might introduce bias into the questions he or she poses to participants and into the interpretation he or she places on the answers participants give should not be minimized, and it must be guarded against. Any researcher using focus groups ought to take a long, hard look at findings that confirm his or her expectations.

Polsby also acknowledges the methodological modesty of *Citizens and Politics*, quoting Harwood's explicit recognition that "the observations detailed in the report are 'hypotheses or insights that would need to be validated by reliable quantitative methods before being considered definitive.'" He complains, however, that the authors made no attempt to confirm or disconfirm their "hypotheses." It is not clear, however, why it should be incumbent on Harwood (whose investigation was, by his own admission, meant to yield only tentative and suggestive conclusions) to undertake the attempt at verification that Polsby urges. Wouldn't it be better to have the conclusions of *Citizens and Politics* confirmed or disconfirmed independently? Polsby cites the debacle not long ago at the University of Utah involving two scientists' claim that they had achieved so-called cold fusion. Now, imagine the Utah scholars' counterparts at UC-Berkeley leaving it up to the original investigators to replicate their own findings and remaining content to complain about the lack of verification in their report. Precisely because of the danger that the investigators themselves may not treat their results as critically as they should, skeptics have a responsibility to test conclusions they find hard to credit.

I wonder, too, why Polsby quotes at length, *not* from the findings and discussion prepared by Harwood, nor even from Kettering president David Mathews's foreword to the

report, but from a subsequent editorial by Mathews in an issue of *The Kettering Review*. This is like basing one's response to a newly published book on a review of the book rather than on the book itself. Mathews's editorial interpretation of *Citizens and Politics* was precisely that. It wasn't the report itself, and as such is at best a secondary source for the conclusions Polsby draws.

But these are small points. More serious is Polsby's insinuation that the authors of *Citizens and Politics* may have acted in bad faith, or, more precisely (and charitably), that they *could* have done so. "A really skilled moderator," Polsby says, "ought to be able in two short hours to get a focus group of 'approximately 12 people' to say nearly anything" (p. 85). Polsby actually raises two questions here. One has to do with the size of the sample (ten groups of about twelve persons each, roughly 120 people) on which the conclusions of *Citizens and Politics* are based. The second concerns the scientific value of focus group research in general. Let me address the former question briefly before delving into the latter.

Although focus groups should be as representative as possible of the target population (those used in preparing *Citizens and Politics* constituted a stratified random sample that took account of differences among Americans related to race, age, income, education, and region), it is unnecessary and inappropriate to insist that they involve as many subjects as surveys require if the sample is to be considered adequate. Focus group research aims to get at the concerns, needs, and feelings that *underlie* people's opinions and preferences. Time and again, such research has revealed that, despite the diversity of circumstance, experience, constitution, perception, etc. that people bring to consideration of a public problem, a relatively few,

universally shared motivations tend to emerge from the discussion. Thus, even the most representative focus groups turn out to be, at the deeper levels of human motivation, surprisingly homogeneous. It is this relative homogeneity that permits focus group researchers (just as it permits psychologists, for example) to have confidence in sample sizes much smaller than those required for survey research.

Turning now to the second question I noted above, Polsby implies that focus group research is inherently more vulnerable to distortion—perhaps even manipulation—by the researcher than is quantitative survey research. But it is a mistake to think that quantitative methods *per se* are inherently proof against the dangers Polsby rightly identifies. It's ironic, in this connection, that he should invoke the name of Sidney Verba, whom he calls a "shrewd student of public opinion" (p. 84). It's ironic because the best example I know of that illustrates the fallibility of survey methods comes from Almond and Verba's "classic" work, *The Civic Culture*. Alasdair MacIntyre has shown how Almond and Verba's naive assumption that "pride" means the same thing for Italians as it does for Britons and Germans led them to the unwarranted conclusion that the former were less committed to and identified with the actions of the Italian government than the latter were with respect to the British and German governments (MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, pp. 262-63). Having negligently assumed that the concept of pride is the same in these three societies, Almond and Verba proceeded to construct questions that were bound to produce erroneous results. No degree of quantitative rigor could have prevented this mistake. The erroneous results were *built into* the survey.

Failure to attend to one's assumptions and to take account of differences between one's own perspective and that of the subjects being studied is not a sin to which practitioners of focus group research are uniquely susceptible. It presents a danger for political inquirers of the quantitative persuasion as much as it does for

researchers employing more qualitative methodologies. As Polsby concedes, "facts rarely speak for themselves." Interpretation is an inescapable feature of *any* research. Our interpretations, in turn, are influenced heavily by, among other things, our own interests and predispositions.

I notice, in this connection, that Polsby confesses to having had "really a lot of fun" when, in his earliest outing as a budding political scientist, he helped show that "Washington elites were wrong about McCarthy" (p. 83). He had fun in large part "*because* [his research] . . . showed that . . . Washington elites were wrong. . . ." (p. 83, my emphasis). To me, this suggests that Polsby had a strong predilection for a particular outcome to his investigation. I do not mean to imply that his research was *distorted* by the anticipated pleasure of showing that policymakers were actually mistaken about what most Americans thought about McCarthy and communism. My point is *not* that the possibility of obtaining results he obviously was pleased to get interfered with his ability to follow, in letter and in spirit, the rules of inquiry prescribed by his new profession. My point is that Polsby's scientific endeavor was motivated in part by the desire to confirm an hypothesis to which he readily—indeed, hopefully—subscribed: namely, that the received wisdom of the time about the beliefs and attitudes of the American public was in fact mistaken. Whether or not by this political act he actually influenced political events, whether or not he even aspired to influence them, clearly Polsby was not indifferent to the potential consequences of his findings. Precisely because he was motivated as he was, his research should not be understood *solely* as an effort to conduct an apolitical, value-neutral scientific inquiry. (I will return to this point below.)

If he's honest with himself, I think Polsby will concede that he doesn't really *want* to believe that Americans are as frustrated, angry, and alienated as Richard Harwood suggests they are. He recoils from what he labels "this comprehensive indictment of the American political

system. . . ," which he likens to a "barnyard" over which "self-congratulation rises like the morning mist. . ." (p. 85). I think it's fair to conclude that—whether or not the question uppermost in Polsby's mind is the one (*viz.*, "Is it true?") he professes it to be—he is *predisposed* to regard Harwood's "indictment" as the scientific equivalent of ordure.

Curiously, though, Polsby does not come out and say that he thinks the conclusions of *Citizens and Politics* are *wrong*. He may justifiably ask, "Is it true?" But is his question merely rhetorical? I submit that we have enough evidence by now to shift the burden to Polsby and his fellow skeptics to show that it is *not* true. The thousands of telephone and written inquiries—from political scientists as well as from journalists and citizens—received by Richard Harwood and by the Kettering Foundation suggest that *Citizens and Politics* touched a raw nerve in the body politic. Compare this response to the skepticism that greeted the Utah researchers' claim that they had achieved cold-fusion. In contrast, so far as I know, *no one* has made so bold as to contend that the findings of *Citizens and Politics* misrepresent reality.

Nor has anyone offered reasons *why* we should doubt Harwood's assessment. This should come as no surprise, for we have an abundance of corroborating evidence that reinforces Harwood's interpretation. Surveys and polls, both academic and commercial, conducted before and after the publication of *Citizens and Politics* show record low levels of confidence in and identification with political institutions, of trust in public figures, of interest in public affairs, in voting turnout, and in feelings of political efficacy. Moreover, if Harwood's conclusions are mistaken, how are we to explain the unprecedented success of a third-party candidate such as Ross Perot? Of the widespread calls for term limitations? Of the unusual number of newly elected members of Congress? The truth is, in all probability Harwood is *dead right*. (Indeed, in retrospect *Citizens and Politics* proves to have had more predictive value—supposedly the hallmark of rigorous social science—than any quantitative

studies available before the election of 1992.) Harwood offered an unusually compelling, lucid, and accessible description and explanation of the state of mind of most Americans today. He provided an interpretation that most Americans can relate to readily. Americans *see themselves* in that report. That is why the public response to it was so strong. And that is why we ought to treat his conclusions as at least *prima facie* valid.

Quantitative methods—especially those employed in survey research—are not the only way of ascertaining what people think. Indeed, they may not even be the best tool at our disposal. (Thank goodness de Tocqueville didn't wait around for George Gallup before trying to understand American political culture!) When we set out to confirm or disconfirm the tentative findings of research such as Richard Harwood's, we should be prepared to ask ourselves whether, numbers aside, the results make sense in light of everything else we know. Do they square not only with other data, but *also* with anecdotal and impressionistic evidence and with our intuitions? Even modern medical diagnosis retains an element of art despite all the science supporting it. The skilled physician will test the numbers against a "gut feeling" about what is wrong with the patient. What Richard Harwood in effect did was to "talk with the patient" and use his intuition to offer a tentative diagnosis. By his own admission, the numbers from the "tests" we might run to confirm this diagnosis are not irrelevant. As it turns out, though, his diagnosis is consistent with the numbers we already have. Just as important, it also fits the patient's self-described symptoms, and it makes sense *to the patient*.

Earlier I observed that Polsby admits to having had "really a lot of fun" in helping to show that "Washington elites were wrong about McCarthy." I suggested that precisely because he was motivated by the hope that he would prove the conventional wisdom wrong, his research should not be understood *solely* as an effort to conduct an apolitical, value-neutral scientific inquiry. In fact, Polsby's research was *also* a *political act*, an act moti-

vated ultimately by a desire to influence political reality for the better. By "political" I don't mean "partisan," but rather "legitimately concerned for the health and well-being of one's society."

This brings me to my philosophical point, which is that *Citizens and Politics* should be understood for what it too in fact is—a methodologically sound empirical inquiry *and* a political act. Criticizing the report from an excessively narrow view of what counts as social scientific inquiry, Polsby draws an invidious contrast with quantitative survey research. He exaggerates the "unscientific" aspect of *Citizens and Politics* while minimizing the ineradicable political element of all research methods, including quantitative methods. Richard Harwood's focus group research was scientific as far as it was intended to be—as a generator of potentially revealing and fruitful hypotheses having *prima facie* plausibility. But the publication of *Citizens and Politics* was *also* an *act of and within the practice of democratic politics*. (This claim is reinforced by David Mathews's editorial interpretation of the report, upon which Polsby clearly relied heavily in forming his judgment about *Citizens and Politics*.)

Citizens and Politics (as amplified by Mathews's editorial) represents one *interpretation* of, one *perspective* on, the beliefs, attitudes, and state of mind of the American public. The report was not presented as a pronouncement of "THE TRUTH" to be accepted without supporting evidence or without question by our fellow citizens (among whom we number the members of the political science profession). Above all, *Citizens and Politics* was an invitation to our fellow citizens to enter into a democratic political dialogue about the condition of democracy in the United States today. It was an offering intended, not to clinch an argument, but to begin a discussion. *Citizens and Politics* was meant to say, in effect,

Here is the way *we and many of the people we have spoken to* experience politics in our country today. The participants in our focus groups confirmed the way *we see things*. *Is that*

your experience as well? If not, what *is* your experience? Why do we see things differently? Can we explore these differences together? If, on the other hand, your experience is similar to ours, what shall we do? How shall we engage those who do not share our experience? What can we do to begin putting things right?

Viewed as a political act—specifically, as an invitation to a democratic dialogue among citizens about politics in our country today—*Citizens and Politics* need not (and could not) by itself represent "the truth." Nor, however, could any number of quantitative surveys of public opinion do so, no matter how academically rigorous they might be. For there just is no public truth except what emerges from a thorough exchange and sharing of our respective interpretations. We are like the groping inquirers in the Jainist fable of the blind men and the elephant. Polsby presumes that, through proper social scientific methods, he and his fellow experts can achieve a perspective that will permit them to grasp the whole of the beast, the "truth" of our political reality. Epistemologically speaking, I can make no sense of this contention. A "true" picture of political reality would have to take account of the various, equally partial perspectives that all Americans hold. The best approximation we can have of this reality can be achieved only through the "instrument of inquiry" that is democratic dialogue. To view it through the lens of traditional quantitative social science is to misapprehend the place of such endeavors in democratic dialogue, and at the same time to privilege the role of quantitative research over public discourse—to silence citizens in favor of "experts."

Focus group research has the virtue, which survey methods lack, of allowing respondents to speak for themselves, in their own words—to "tell their own stories." The opportunity for elaboration and reaction to what other people say *reduces* rather than increases the risk that the researcher will, through his or her questions and behavior, bias the response. It enables the researcher to discover what people genuinely feel and believe at the same time that

they are making this discovery through talking with each other. Focus groups thus produce a wealth of information and a degree of flexibility that surveys cannot achieve. Compared to focus group investigators, survey researchers rather resemble the hostile attorney in a TV courtroom who insists that the witness “just answer the question—yes or no?!” Suspicion of focus group research bespeaks a lack of confidence in the ability of one’s subjects to think and speak for themselves. Such research presumes what many quantitative investigators appear loath to concede—namely, that ordinary folks are quite capable of articulating for themselves what they believe and feel and why they do so. This presumption grows stronger the more one is exposed to the real, complex, whole human beings who make up focus groups. In some measure, perhaps, the critics of qualitative methods distrust such methods because they distrust the ability of their fellow citizens to know their own minds.

This brings me, finally, to a concluding word about inappropriate comparisons between quantitative surveys of public opinion and focus group research. Polsby is quite right to point out “how thin and insubstantial the instrumentation is that undergirds most of the day-to-day monitoring of public opinion. . . .” And with justifiable pride he recommends to us, as an example of the superior rigor and thoroughness of scholarly research, a poll he helped design for the purpose of ascertaining the public’s willingness during the Viet Nam war “to bear the costs of the conflict at increased, decreased, or more or less the same levels of investment” (p. 84).

I mention this example because it points to the importance of asking citizens to face up to and make choices, *as a public*. But how can citizens make such choices—*as a public*—without interacting with each other, without talking together? Here we arrive at the nub of the issue. Even the best scholarly surveys only *aggregate opinion—they merely sum individual views*. They do not capture what the public thinks *qua public*. There just is no genuinely *public* view until the individual mem-

bers of the public have thought and talked *together* about what they, *as a public*, believe, feel, and want. This assertion will strike some as a soft-headed, unscientific reification of an entity that in reality is no more than the sum of its individual parts. But this objection represents a *philosophical* position (methodological individualism) that can be debated only on meta-theoretical grounds, not within the framework of the assumptions that constitute conventional political science.

Anyone who has observed focus groups in action knows from first-hand experience that there is a genuine difference between what *individuals* say they believe, feel, and want *as individuals* and what those same individuals, when they take on the role of *members of the public*, say they feel, believe, and want *as a community or society*. The latter information emerges only as citizens deliberate together. For the purpose of capturing this “public voice,” opinion surveys, whether scholarly or otherwise, are wholly inadequate. This is something that surveys, with their individualistic and aggregating bias, cannot capture. Focus group research concerns itself, not with what *individuals* say in response to questions, but with what the *group* feels and believes, which reveals itself as individual members of the group talk with each other. A representative microcosm of *the public* is not the same thing as a representative sample of a collection of individuals. Experienced and conscientious experts in survey research, such as Daniel Yankelovich, understand this. That is why students of Yankelovich such as Richard Harwood have turned to focus group research as their primary tool for trying to ascertain, not what *individuals* think, but what *the public* thinks.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that *Citizens and Politics* asks social scientists to remember that they are citizens as well as scholars, and that in a democracy the appropriate response to a political act on the part of one’s fellow citizens is not to retreat behind the (transparent) screen of professional expertise, but to engage them in political dialogue. To this dialogue social scientists may and should bring their reservations

and their professional skepticism. But they should not look upon reports such as *Citizens and Politics* as competing attempts to characterize reality objectively and with universal validity, for that is neither what they are nor what they are intended to be. Should scholars choose to accept an invitation to democratic dialogue, they will be responding to (admittedly partial and tentative) alternative interpretations of political reality generated by the experiences of their fellow citizens. Their contribution to the public interpretation of reality lies not in displacing others’ interpretations to advance their own “truth,” but in participating in what must be a collective undertaking. For the practical purpose of constructing such an interpretation, no one’s perspective—not even the social scientist’s—is in itself sufficient and definitive. Like pieces of a puzzle, like the threads in a tapestry, like the members of a jazz ensemble, each has its place.

A final indulgence: To Polsby’s invocation of Neil Simon, let me offer this snippet from Lewis Carroll in response:

You may charge me with murder—
or want of sense—
(We are all of us weak at times.):
But the slightest approach to a false
pretense
Was never among my crimes.

Note

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