

“How Much Do Voters Know?”

By Alexander Burns, *Politico*, March 13, 2012.

This article shows the American voter’s intelligence in a less than flattering light. Should we be insulted?

Voters are appalled at President Barack Obama’s handling of gas prices, even though virtually every policy expert in both parties says there’s little a president can do to affect the day-to-day price of fuel in a global market.

Americans are disgusted at Washington’s bailout culture, and especially the 2008 rescue of the financial services industry. They’re so fed up with bailouts, in fact, that a majority of them now think federal intervention in the auto industry was a good idea that helped the country.

They’re aghast at the trajectory of the war in Afghanistan, which Obama helped escalate and extend, and they don’t think the war was worth it in the first place. And many also think Obama is handling the conflict acceptably well.

That’s presumably a different set of voters than the ones who routinely tell pollsters that they still believe the president is a Muslim, despite all public evidence to the contrary.

Add up that litany of contradictory, irrational or simply silly opinions, and it’s enough to make a political professional suspect the electorate is, well, not entirely sophisticated about the choices it’s facing in 2012.

“The first lesson you learn as a pollster is that people are stupid,” said Tom Jensen of Public Policy Polling, a Democratic polling firm. “I tell a client trying to make sense of numbers on a poll that are inherently contradictory that at least once a week.”

Jensen, a Democrat, pointed to surveys showing that voters embraced individual elements of the Affordable Care Act, while rejecting the overall law, as an example of the political schizophrenia or simple ignorance that pollsters and politicians must contend with.

“We’re seeing that kind of thing more and more. I think it’s a function of increased political polarization and voters just digging in their heels and refusing to consider the opposing facts once they’ve formed an opinion about something,” said

Jensen, who has generated eye-catching data showing many GOP primary voters still question the president’s religion and nationality. “I also think voters are showing a tendency to turn issues that should be factual or non-factual into opinions. If you show a Tennessee birther Obama’s birth certificate, they’re just going to say ‘well in my opinion he’s not a real American.’ It’s not about the birth certificate; it’s about expressing hatred for Obama in any form they can.”

But irrationality on policy issues transcends party lines and cuts across groups that feel differently about the president. Taken all together, the issue polling compiled so far in the 2012 cycle presents a sharp corrective to the candidates’ description of the race as a great debate placing two starkly different philosophies of government before an informed electorate.

In reality, the contest has been more like a game of Marco Polo, as a hapless gang of Republican candidates and a damaged, frantic incumbent try to connect with a historically fickle and frustrated electorate.

And “fickle” is a nice way of describing the voters of 2012, who appear to be wandering, confused and Forrest Gump-like through the experience of a presidential campaign. It isn’t just unclear which party’s vision they’d rather embrace; it’s entirely questionable whether the great mass of voters has even the most basic grasp of the details—or for that matter, the most elementary factual components—of the national political debate.

The present furor over gas prices is a case in point: Obama’s job approval dropped 9 points over the last month, according to a CBS/*New York Times* poll, as the cost of fuel has risen abruptly. The survey found that 54 percent of Americans believe that the president can do a lot to combat high gas prices.

That’s not really true, but it’s a dynamic that’s shown up in other polls too: 26 percent of respondents told an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll that they approve of

Obama’s handling of gas prices, versus 65 percent who disapprove.

For voters to disapprove of Obama’s energy and economic policies may be completely rational. But to reassess a president’s performance in the context of a short-term increase in gas prices is more of a tantrum-like response to a new feeling of discomfort over which the president has relatively little control.

“Gas prices are a surrogate for Obama performance and evaluations of his job performance,” said Steve Lombardo, who worked for Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign in 2008 and is the head of the research and consulting firm StrategyOne. “Might not be fair but that is the way it is. The higher the gas prices the lower Obama’s approval rating.”

That calculus is fairly straightforward, though it’s one that has frustrated presidents of both parties for decades. Other examples of the befuddlement of the 2012 voter are tougher to decode.

Take bailouts, for example. Today, Americans loathe the Troubled Assets Relief Program even more than they did in 2008. In the thick of the ’08 financial crisis, 57 percent of respondents told Pew that government intervention was appropriate. Now, that number is 39 percent, extending an anti-bailout craze that helped drive the 2008 election.

But Americans aren’t opposed to all bailouts, apparently. Amid a flurry of positive earnings reports from GM and Chrysler—and a comeback story told enthusiastically by public figures from Obama to Clint Eastwood—a 56 percent majority of Americans now think bailing out the auto industry was good for the economy. That’s up from 37 percent in 2009, according to Pew.

Never mind the fact that the bank bailout has been at least as successful at reviving the financial sector as the auto rescue has been for Detroit.

A similar level of capriciousness is evident in foreign affairs. Americans’ views of

their overseas entanglements has been on the decline. According to Gallup, just 54 percent of Americans now view the United States as the world’s preeminent military power—a 10-point drop since 2010. Last spring, Gallup tracked a quick reversal of public opinion on the intervention in Libya, going from a 10-point net positive public view to a 7-point net negative one over the course of a month. Sixty percent of voters now believe that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting, according to ABC News and the *Washington Post*.

And yet, Obama—who escalated the Afghan war with a temporary troop surge—continues to break even or fare a bit better than that when it comes to foreign policy and national security. The ABC/*Washington Post* poll found 46 percent of voters approve of his handling of the war, while 47 percent disapprove. Those aren’t great numbers—except they look pretty good when three-fifths of the country think the war was a waste of time and effort.

Gallup analyst Jeffrey Jones said the seeming inconsistencies can come from the fact that voters “probably don’t have a whole lot of detailed and specific information about the policies that are being put forward.”

“When people evaluate presidents on certain issues, they’re probably starting with a pretty global view of how he’s doing and then adjust that for how he’s doing in a particular area,” Jones said. Applying that explanation to the drop in U.S. military confidence, Jones suggested: “It may stem in part from a global view, that things aren’t going that well in the U.S.”

Republican presidential strategist Mary Matalin gave a similar explanation for why public opinion often adds up to something different than the sum of its parts. As voters take stock of public events, there’s often tension between their feelings about granular policy topics and the overarching principles that encompass those issues.

Like Jensen, she pointed to the debate over health care, suggesting that voters’ support for goals like containing the cost of care ended up getting overwhelmed by their distaste for government power—giving rise to an apparent contradiction.

“In large measure, they’re often not contradictions,” she said. “There was a time when health care, Obamacare, just transcended health care and it became a proxy for counterproductive government expansion. When that flipped from coverage, or cost-cutting of coverage—all the issues that Obama said it was, which people like . . . it has now transcended that.”

For voters and politicians and analysts who would prefer to see a more logical, coherent set of public responses to public problems, the good news is this: much of the day-to-day variation in policy polling will not, ultimately, have a major impact on the result of the 2012 election.

Indeed, the sheer irrationality and volatility of voters’ views on most issues ends up giving disproportionate weight to the few issues where their opinions are strong and basically stable.

In 2012, that would not necessarily include the auto bailout or the intervention in Libya, or even gas prices as an issue in itself. It would include the larger state of the economy—and maybe nothing else.

“If the economy is bad, that’s going to be the single issue and it’s almost like nothing else matters,” Jones said.

And besides, said Quinnipiac pollster Peter Brown, if voters seem to the political class like they are temperamental or unreasonable, it’s sort of beside the point. Americans may change their policy views as they learn more or as events change, or for no good reason at all. But in the end, those views are the only metric in electoral politics that really matters.

“Just because someone’s not familiar with something doesn’t mean they won’t give you their opinion. And just because they don’t know a lot about it—their vote still counts as much as someone who does know a lot about it,” Brown said.

“In the business of politics, voters are always right. Just like on Wall Street, the market is always right,” he said. “You don’t fight the market.”

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Consider the source and the audience: Alexander Burns writes for *Politico*, a Washington-insider kind of newspaper—read by a who’s-who roster of people who make the federal government tick. Why might this somewhat condescending view of the American voter be of interest to such readers?

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions: Burns is not writing an opinion piece, but he certainly seems to be implying that American voters aren’t the brightest bulbs around. What does the pollster he quotes mean by saying that the American voter is “stupid”? What would “smart” look like for the analysts quoted here?

Uncover the evidence: Burns cites a lot of inconsistent positions held by Americans. Is that enough to persuade you that voters aren’t very smart? What is the defense brought by people like Jones and Matalin? Are there other ways of being smart politically that aren’t covered here?

Evaluate the conclusion: Burns implies that American voters hold many contradictory positions that don’t rationally fit together, but at the end of his piece he quotes a pollster who says “the voters are always right” in a democratic system, and everyone’s votes count the same. What does that mean?

Sort out the political implications:

On the whole, is this an optimistic or a pessimistic take on the American system? If we are “stupid,” are we doomed?



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