

# What You Want vs. What You Get

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*by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young*

One of the more provocative questions in public life is whether public opinion actually matters much in setting public policy. Does what ordinary people think, say or feel about government policy have much to do with the policies we get? Is what we get from government what we want?

The question is hardly academic in a democracy, nor is it obscure. It gets freshly raised each budget season when state governors lay out their policy agenda for the coming fiscal period.

Chief executives in Pennsylvania and most other states have been doing this for decades in an annual ritual almost fossilized with routine. Governors make various and sundry budget proposals; said proposals are discussed and debated, sort of; some are adopted, others rejected, and many ignored. And so it goes. Democracy proceeds. The public policy bus drives on to the next budget cycle, the next election and the next new idea.

But what role does public opinion have in all of this? Does, as democratic theory teaches, public policy follow public opinion? Do the people say "yes" and yes it is, or "no" and no it becomes? Or is the public's opinion just political dross to be ignored, if not despised, by politicians and policymakers?

The evidence on the matter is decidedly mixed as to whether public opinion matters or not in setting policy. Or to put it more candidly, political scientists and others who study public opinion can't make up their mind.

One important series of studies has measured the fit between what policies people say they want or support in polls and what policies get enacted. Their conclusion is that public opinion only weakly influences public policy. If you are not a bureaucrat or a lobbyist you don't matter much.

But other studies have reached the opposite conclusion, arguing that public opinion does indeed strongly influence public policy - sometimes directly, more often indirectly and always importantly.

This particular debate has some salience now in the aftermath of Governor Ed Rendell's recent budget proposals in which he recommended some fifteen new or modified policies ranging from economic development to prison construction.

Recently, the *Franklin & Marshall College Poll* ([/fandmpoll](#)) measured public opinion preferences for each of the fifteen proposals. The poll findings probably constitute a good indicator of the broad contour of public opinion on each of them.

And so we have the basis for a fascinating experiment. If public opinion does matter, we would expect ultimately to see the policies favored by poll respondents to be adopted and those opposed rejected. On the other hand, if public opinion doesn't matter - if the "public opinion bunk crowd" is right - we wouldn't expect to see much connection between public opinion on a given policy proposal and whether it is adopted or not.

Certainly some of these fifteen proposals deeply divide Pennsylvanians. For example, Rendell's proposal to eliminate 2,600 state jobs were favored by 44%, opposed by 45% and 11% weren't sure how they felt. Similarly, increasing funding for prisons was favored by 48%, opposed by 43% and nine percent were undecided. Video poker and public television also divide opinion, although less sharply. About these issues we must say public opinion is split and less useful as a guide to policy.

But more common and certainly more striking about many of Rendell's proposals is the decisiveness of the public opinion elicited by them. When polled Pennsylvanians were asked if they "favored" or "opposed" them, the answers were clear cut.

For example, two of three people "strongly favor" policies to encourage businesses to locate in state and six in ten strongly favor more funding for new energy sources. Almost six in ten strongly favor new tobacco taxes and one in two strongly favor more funding for state universities. Opposition to these proposals ranged from as few as one percent to not more than 18%. In short, public opinion could not be clearer: enact these policies.

Conversely several of the policy proposals measured in the *Franklin and Marshall College Poll* elicited decisively negative judgments. Allowing county governments to increase the sales tax by one percent was strongly opposed by a stunning 51%. Reducing the number of school districts from 500 to 100 was even less popular, with some 53% strongly opposed. As with the popular proposals, public opinion could not be clearer. The public strongly rejects these policies.

So, what Pennsylvanian's would like from Rendell and the legislature is clear enough: expanded health care coverage, some targeted tax increases, attention to energy issues, infrastructure projects, and more university funding. And what they don't favor is equally clear: don't mess with the school districts and no sales tax for counties.

Many object to seeing public opinion as the source of all wisdom. Some denigrate public opinion as often uninformed, unstable or just plain murky on many issues. And others raise the question whether what we want is also good for us. Still others argue that it is not so simple since policy differences arise between statewide sentiment and the local views of people in various legislative districts. Whose constituents really matter in pursuing statewide policy goals?

These are not necessarily irreverent objections to using public opinion to set policy. Indeed the record of Pennsylvania public opinion on some of these fifteen policy proposals raises the proverbial eyebrow. V.O. Key was right of course: voters are not fools. But they not always correct either.

Nevertheless there are few more compelling questions in a democracy than whether the people know what they want and whether they get what they want. These are questions we need to raise more often than we do, and this seems a good time to do it. Pennsylvanians know what they want as part of this year's budget. Now let's see if they get it.

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