Public Opinion About Surveys

Kim, Gershenson, Glaser, and Smith (KGGS) recently released a study about public opinion towards surveys and surveyors. Their findings should concern parties who conduct surveys, parties who use survey data, and parties that plan to use surveys. KGGS make the following points, among others:

1. “Surveys on surveys, which ‘question respondents about attitudes and past actions concerning surveys’…have been an important tool for gauging the concerns of the public toward polling, and for guiding our own conduct in meeting their grievances or preferences in order to accurately measure the voice of the people…” [p. 166]

2. “In conclusion, although many people still believe that polls have a useful purpose, people have grown distrustful of those doing the polling. Also, the general understanding of how scientific polling works is low, and respondents are greatly concerned about confidentiality. Finally, some evidence indicates that respondents find the interview experience less interesting than they once did…” [p. 185]

3. “From 1998 to 2006, the percentage of Americans who would ‘generally trust [pollsters] to tell the truth’ dropped from 55 to 34 percent…No other profession that we know of lost as much trust as pollsters during these eight years…By 2006, pollsters ranked barely less trustworthy than Congress members (35 percent) and somewhat more trustworthy than union leaders (30 percent)” [p. 168]

4. “Between 1990 and 2006, the percentage agreeing that the ‘survey research industry serves a useful purpose’ sank from 86 to 56%...From 2001 to 2006, only a small but steady 27 to 29% of respondents thought that survey organizations could be trusted to protect respondents’ privacy…this decline in trust also extends to the Census Bureau. From 1979 to 2000, a consistent two-thirds of Americans believed that it is very important to be counted in the Census…While in 1990 a plurality of Americans believed that the Census Bureau kept personal information confidential and that the Bureau asked only what had good reason to know, by 2000 these were no longer plurality views…This growing cynicism toward those who conduct surveys, then, seems pervasive…” [pp.170 -171]

5. “The belief that measuring public opinion is good in and of itself does not imply that people believe that public officials should rely on polling over their own judgments when making policy decisions. Nonetheless, the former belief is only slightly more prevalent than the latter. Americans seem to be skeptical that public opinion has much of an effect in the public sphere…Of two items asking if surveys give people an opportunity to provide better products and services, both remained stable over the period 2001 to 2006, with six out of 10 respondents selecting the positive response…While this number is lower than it was in the 1990s, it is higher than it was before the 1990s…Again, regard for public opinion polling remained high, with only some evidence of the decline in favorability toward pollsters occurring during this same period…” [p. 175]

6. “Knowledge of Polling…An item asked in 1975 and 1988 shows that about six out of 10 respondents thought they understood how a poll ‘can reflect the views of the whole country’…, yet similar questions asked in 1997 and 2005 show that about two-thirds of respondents felt that sample sizes of 1,000 to 2,000 are not large enough to ‘accurately reflect the views of the nation’s population’…” [p. 176]

7. “As many have observed, the refusal rate has risen sharply over the past few decades…Whereas in 1990, 61% of household heads thought answering polls was an interesting experience, in 2006 only 36% felt so…Similarly, while 67% in 1990 thought that answering polls was in their best interest, in 2006 only 33% thought so…Thus, twice as many people think the survey research industry serves a useful purpose as think taking polls is in their best interest…This is clear
8. “Another oft-mentioned culprit is the practice of ‘selling under the guise of research’ (sugging). This trend has been remarkably stable, with nearly one-third of the population reporting having been sugged in the past year...Despite this practice, a relatively stable majority of over three-quarters of respondents report that their last survey experience was very/somewhat pleasant…” [p. 185]

KGGS based their analysis on the available results from established polling operations in the United States. Their study is essentially a focused literature review (but not a meta-analysis).

This study will interest researchers because it can help them plan and conduct surveys. To some extent, KGGS help us to understand the difficulties facing modern survey projects and to explore common beliefs and opinions about surveys in the public interest (aside from marketing research surveys).

Jibum Kim (research scientist, National Opinion Research Center in Chicago), Carl Gershenson (graduate student, Department of Sociology, Harvard University), Patrick Glaser (Director of Respondent Cooperation for CMOR in Connecticut), and Tom W. Smith (Director of General Social Survey at NORC) provide details in an article (“Trends in Surveys on Surveys”) published in the peer-reviewed journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring 2011, Vol. 75, No.1, pp. 165-191). Readers with a background in survey research will find the content and style of the paper accessible.

Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at:

[Abstract by Willard Hom, Director of Research, Analysis & Accountability, Chancellor’s Office, California Community Colleges, 9/29/2011]