

WHAT AMERICANS BELIEVE

Report on a Young Science

By STUART CHASE, *economist and social scientist*. Mr. Chase's latest book is *American Credos*, a survey of attitudes and beliefs held by people in the United States today.

A HISTORIAN looks back nostalgically on the 1930s and says with some feeling: "I like to believe that the men and women of America loved more strongly, felt more deeply, generated more warmth and held more compassion for their fellow men than ever before or since. . . ."

A famous columnist makes the gloomy observation: "Slowly but surely, children are approaching the status of monsters more devastating than any army."

A radio commentator lays it on the line in the Berlin crisis of 1961: "The vast majority of U. S. citizens remain resolved to face Communist pressure without yielding an inch."

Well, maybe, but no proof was offered for any of these propositions at the time of their announcement. A Gallup poll during the Berlin crisis of 1961 asked a nationwide sample of U. S. citizens: "Do you think the United Nations should try to settle the Berlin problem?" Eighty-one percent said "yes"—which is quite a way from "not yielding an inch."

When high problems, foreign or domestic, are discussed, somebody is almost sure to say that the American people will never stand for this, or are solidly behind that. How does the speaker know what the American people will stand for? Mostly, of course, he does not know; he just assumes, humanly enough, that the American people will stand for what he stands for.

A professional experience described by a leading analyst nicely illustrates the distinction between hunch and knowledge. The analyst had been retained to conduct an opinion survey among employees of a large industrial plant: how they felt about the union, the boss, the company, working conditions; how well they liked their jobs; and so on. The union's reaction to the project was chilly. When the men were assured that no names would be revealed, and that union as well as management would see the figures, suspicions began to ease. Finally the presi-

really feel, and I'm for Mr. Analyst here finding out." (He did find out, and I have the figures in my files.)

Nobody knows how the American people really feel, failing a reliable method to measure their opinions. Biologists and psychologists can tell us a good deal about the built-in drives of the human organism and about such emotional responses as the frustration-aggression reaction. Anthropologists can tell us about predictable patterns in the culture, such as acceptable behavior at a funeral. But only direct quantitative measurement can tell us

how large groups of people react to current issues, what they think about their political leaders, and the relative strength of many of their hopes and fears. The young science of opinion research has gone a long way in the last generation toward providing this information.

The finger-in-the-wind school, however, does not readily surrender. When opinion polls in the spring of 1962 showed the popularity of President Kennedy to be unusually high, the Republican Congressional Committee asked thirty Republican Congressmen, who had recently travelled about the country, if their soundings confirmed the polls. "No," said nineteen; "Yes," said four; "Don't know," said seven.

This heavy "no" vote was not altogether unpredictable. Picture a Congressman in rapid transit from airfield to banquet hall, to press conference, to smoke-filled room, shaking hands, thumping shoulders; then compare his report to one based on carefully worded interviews with a nationwide sample of adult Americans, selected by probability mathematics and carrying



dent of the union rose to his feet. "I'm for it," he said, "and here's why. I tell the management how the workers feel. They like this and they don't like that, and I bang the table! So Bill here (pointing to the superintendent of the plant) Bill says no, they like that and they don't like this, and he bangs the table! But neither of us knows a damn thing about how you fellows

a known percentage of error, say about 2 or 3 per cent.

Political wisecracks were stunned when Nelson Rockefeller decided not to seek the nomination for President in 1960, giving as his reason the low ratings on opinion polls. The new technique had obviously come of age so far as dependability went. No man would deliberately surrender his chance for the greatest job on earth because of reports based on a shaky technique.

OPINION research is a social invention like trial by jury, a tool for understanding human problems better. Every new tool brings, of course, unforeseen effects, which tend to change the culture in some degree. Like many another invention, from the fist axe to the airplane, polling can be used as either a tool or a weapon. It can aid the search for truth, or produce propaganda—an especially dangerous weapon. So far, our chief defense against this dishonest use of opinion research is the integrity of the profession, which remains high.

The profession needs judgment, along with integrity and technical skill. It needs to know the kinds of questions the technique is incapable of handling. The polls can answer a question with precision when the respondent has adequate background knowledge—supporting, say, his attitude toward the United Nations. Abstract terms of a high order, however, can cause trouble; the researcher must climb down the verbal ladder to specific things. Thus substantial majorities consistently reject the “welfare state,” but even larger majorities will approve unemployment insurance, old age pensions, “Medicare,” and other welfare legislation. Workers in a mass production plant may say initially they like their jobs. But polling in depth discloses that they like the pay, the lighting, and the clean washrooms, while the work itself bores them to extinction: “The only satisfaction around here, Doc, is the old buck.”

An opinion based on a blank mind is worthless—except as an index of ignorance. A question too close to the standard culture pattern (e.g., “Should husbands be faithful to their wives?”) is not very useful. One can predict a 98 per cent “yes” vote, with perhaps two D.K.’s (Don’t Knows).

If the respondent has only a little information, he can be pushed by an unscrupulous interviewer into almost any answer. Or he may fabricate an answer to protect his ego. On the question, “What is Zen Buddhism?” a nation-wide sample might report 95 per cent “Don’t Knows,” with the remaining

5 per cent not knowing either, but putting their best foot forward.

Opinion research, like chemical research, is not a matter for amateurs to putter around in. They can blow themselves up.

The distinguished psychologist Hadley Cantril, who is well aware of technical difficulties, points out: “A tool must be evaluated not against an absolute standard of efficiency but against the efficiency of alternative tools that are available.” The chief alternatives, as we have noted, are intuition, hunch, and a finger-in-the-wind.

Up to a generation ago there was precious little science in polling. A newspaper might simply send out reporters to ask people on the street how they were going to vote. The *Literary Digest* in the Presidential election of 1936 sent out millions of return-postcards to telephone subscribers and automobile owners, asking the same question about their voting intentions. Results from both these techniques were bound to be heavily biased. The people on a street or two do not constitute an accurate sample of the town, let alone the country. Telephone subscribers and automobile owners were better heeled in 1936 than the average; most of them voted Republican and “elected” Landon—while the not so well-heeled mass of voters was electing Roosevelt. And that was the end of the *Digest* as a vendible property.

How is it possible to get a true measurement of opinion if the “universe” is large—say, all adult Americans, or all persons gainfully employed? To ask every one of them becomes prohibitively time consuming and expensive. Sampling theory must be introduced, so that a negotiable sample will give approximately the same result as if the whole universe had been polled. Thus, when Dr. Gallup reports that 81 per cent of adult Americans think that President Kennedy is doing a good job, he derives the figure from a sample of about 3,000 actual citizens, using the qualified random-sampling method.

SCIENTIFIC sampling is an old technique and very common when applied to physical things. Your wife bakes a pan of cookies and asks you how they taste. You do not have to eat the whole “universe” to find out. If an inspection of a few units will approximate the inspection of all the units in a given universe, the cost of the operation is vastly reduced. Inventories of fluids, grains, wines, and merchandise, for example, have long been calculated by sampling.

The theory was first applied to public opinion in the 1920s in the field of marketing research. Consumers were

asked, “Do you like our new toaster?” Advertisers found that the polling paid off in sales. In 1935 *Fortune* retained the Roper firm to apply sampling theory to public questions. A few months later, Dr. George Gallup released a press service based on scientific sampling. Both agencies used trained interviewers and the quota method, a way of making sure that the sample had characteristics similar to the universe—rich and poor, men and women, white and colored, and so on. People were asked not only for whom they were going to vote, but what they thought of foreign policy, various New Deal measures, Mr. Roosevelt’s performance, labor unions—all sorts of things.

Business men, it should be strongly emphasized, were the first customers of the young science; perhaps three quarters of all opinion research today is still done for commercial firms—including TV ratings—which can make or break a show. Business executives are not noted for throwing their money away on dreamy theories.

PRESENTLY universities, foundations, and government adopted the new tool. In addition, representatives of all the social sciences—economists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, even political scientists—realized that it could aid them. Specialists in probability mathematics, like Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld, helped reduce margins of error.

A calamitous error in predicting occurred in the Presidential election of 1948. The predicting of elections is not a popular activity among opinion analysts, but such predictions are important to the profession for one main reason: they enable the poll-takers to check the accuracy of their methods. The poll-takers made the mistake of electing Dewey in September while the voters elected Truman in November. Here, not the sampling but the timing was at fault. Not nearly enough attention had been paid to the 10 per cent who change their minds in the weeks just before election. If the election had been held in September, 1948, it is not improbable that Dewey would have won.

The lesson in time lag has been learned. Many finger-in-the-wind commentators came swinging out for a Kennedy landslide just before the 1960 election. Not so the poll-takers. Said Roper: “This is the most volatile election we have ever tried to measure, and it could go either way.” As we all know, Kennedy won over Nixon in a hairline finish by fewer than 200,000 popular votes. In discussing the result, researcher Angus Campbell observed: “Just as the polls were not as bad as they looked in 1948, they are probably

not as good as they look in 1960. . . . The hazards of predicting have certainly not been eliminated, but they have been reduced."

The reduction of hazards is demonstrated by the rapid spread of this social invention. Opinion research is now a massive enterprise with agencies all over the world. The same question—duly translated—can be asked in a dozen countries at the same time. Take, for instance, the question, "Do you think school children should be taught a universal language along with their own?" In all nations polled, this query received a strongly affirmative majority response. Not to be outdone by the West, Russia has just organized the Soviet Public Opinion Institute. How objective its methodology is remains to be seen.

A clearing house for all polling agencies has been established at Williams College in Massachusetts. Here are collected and classified significant results from eighteen American and twenty-six foreign research agencies. You can obtain for a modest fee a report on any question which has been responsibly polled.

Every month the headlines carry a count of the unemployed in America. How are they counted? By sampling theory, of course; to interview the total labor force of close to 70 million is unthinkable. Field interviewers of the U.S. Labor Department visit 35,000 households in 333 areas chosen at random throughout the country, about one household in 1,500. From this monthly sample, total employment is calculated with the help of IBM machines, and high policy governing the U.S. economy is based thereon. The U.S. Information Agency uses the tool abroad to discover what our allies think about American policies and American behavior. The Public Health Service recently completed a survey of the effects of smoking via the sampling technique. The New York Times employed an agency to determine the market before deciding to print an edition on the West Coast.

Perhaps the most extensive use of the technique to date was the work of the late Dr. Samuel A. Stouffer during the war. He polled G.I. reactions to army food, equipment, uniforms, the entertainment offered, promotion methods, leadership, and discipline, and asked, "What are your plans after the war?" The point system of discharge, which worked so well, was determined by sampling theory. The Army knew in advance, by virtue of Stouffer's work, how many claimants there would be under the G.I. Bill of Rights—a finding which eventually saved American taxpayers millions of dollars.

On one occasion Stouffer's interviewers asked: "Is an enlisted man more concerned with what other enlisted men think of him than with what his officers think?" "Yes," said 89 per cent. As a result, the Army worked to strengthen group loyalty ("Don't let your buddies down") rather than loyalty to officers.

ONCE a poll stopped a race riot. A postwar housing project in Seattle had 700 white and 300 Negro families. Incidents occurred and violence seemed near. The Public Opinion Laboratory of the University of Washington rushed interviewers to the project. A sample showed little race antagonism but acute dissatisfaction with heating systems, kitchen equipment, muddy interior roads, and other structural defects. Equipment and roads were repaired and race tension faded out.

Elmo Roper has suggested that the United States government organize a research agency as far removed from politics as the Supreme Court. It would retain a corps of trained interviewers to question the American people, via sampling theory, on important public issues—say, a plan for disarmament, or Federal aid to education. The Administration and Congress, whether controlled by Republicans or Democrats, could be informed, and to a degree guided, by the results.

The voice of the people may not be the voice of God, but in a democracy it is important to know how people feel, and how strongly they feel. Especially important are the areas of public ignor-

ance. Studies I have recently made of the polls indicate the following areas of ignorance today:

Unawareness of the massive effects of technology on our lives.

Unawareness of the true goals of education.

Unawareness of the imperatives of the nuclear age.

Ignorance of the Bill of Rights, and why it is so important in a political democracy.

Little comprehension of the economic difference between open and closed societies.

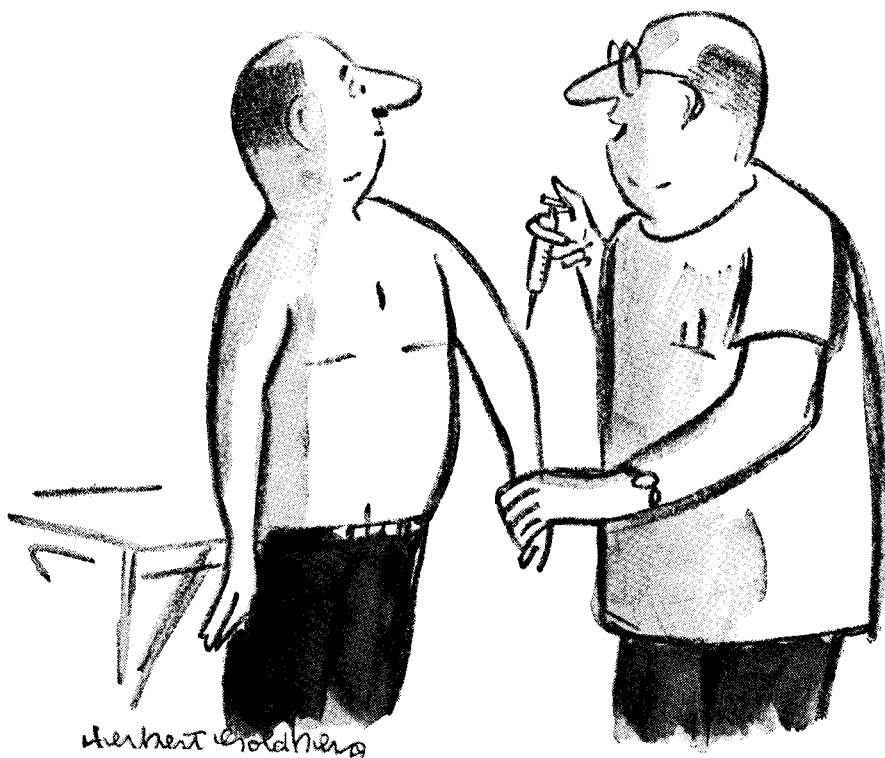
Gross inability to define "Communism," and so intelligently assess its threat.

The paradox implied in people's high regard for such public offices as President and Senator, and their hope that their own children will not seek public office.

Ignorance of the population explosion.

Suppose that the great engines of the mass media went to work on these areas as powerfully as they work at unifying the nation in an acute crisis like war. Imagine the difference it would make in the responsiveness of citizens and of Congress to constructive proposals, and how it could reduce the time lag in making needed adjustments to change.

An urgent responsibility for leaders in a democracy is to locate areas of ignorance and arouse interest in and action on important issues. To this end, opinion research can lend powerful support. The possibilities for its creative use have not yet been tapped.



"By the way, Mr. Cogwell, what's your opinion on Medicare?"

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A Community of Hope and Responsibility

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following editorial is drawn from a Commencement Talk given at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas, June 2, 1962.*

THE OTHER DAY a friend of mine, like countless thousands of others throughout the country, received a telephone call from his broker. The stock market was in a deep dive. The broker advised my friend to sell, while there was still something left to sell. And, like many others, my friend sold—not because he thought there was anything wrong or unsound about the companies in which he had invested, but because he had been hit by a chain reaction of fear. It didn't occur to him that he might be helping to produce the very crash he dreaded, or that he might be contributing to a state of panic that might crack the economy and do grave damage to the country.

When I spoke to my friend about this, asking whether he didn't feel any sense of responsibility beyond his own Profit & Loss position, he stared at me coldly and said: "Let someone else be responsible. I'm looking out for Number One."

I thought back to a conversation I had with a Soviet economics professor in Moscow two years earlier. The Soviet professor said that Marxist scholars believed that capitalism would collapse ultimately—not solely because of inherent flaws in the structure of capitalism itself but because it wasn't really an ideology. He said that it inspired no

sense of basic allegiance or willingness to sacrifice—the prime test of a strong ideology.

"Even your capitalists don't really believe in it," he said. "Whenever there is a real test of confidence, they turn and run. And the result is that the structure of capitalism will topple—because it won't have enough support from the people themselves."

He went on to say that the difference between communism and capitalism as economic doctrines was that the first was built to cope with adversity while the second was prone to it.

I told the Soviet economist that I believed he was mistaken about the notion that all Americans reacted the same way and would crumple in any genuine showdown. And his greatest error was the assumption that America lacked an ideology.

As I say, this discussion with a Soviet economist came to mind when my friend told me the other day that he felt no special responsibility beyond his own financial condition. There was no connection in his own mind between what he did and the gloating that took place in *Pravda* and in Communist circles throughout the world over the gyrations on Wall Street. In fact, my friend prides himself on being militantly anti-Communist. He would yield second place in the decibel count to no one in his proclamations against communism. But his proclamations are meaningless alongside his actions. He doesn't comprehend that the

best way of defending his society against totalitarianism is by doing all the things, small or large, that are required to make freedom work.

I think my friend would probably reply to this by saying that I am exaggerating his importance. After all, he might say, he is only one man. Why should I suppose that his one finger in the dyke could hold back the flood when everyone else was rushing for the dry highlands? More specifically, even if he hadn't told his broker to sell that Blue Monday, would it have made one whit of difference? Or would he have been left holding the bag—and an empty one at that?

In a sense, my friend represents the eternal and ultimate problem of a free society. It is the problem of the individual who thinks that one man cannot possibly make a difference in the destiny of that society.

It is the problem of the individual who doesn't really understand the nature of a free society or what is required to make it work.

It is the problem of the individual who has no comprehension of the multiplying power of single but sovereign units.

It is the problem of the individual who regards the act of pulling a single lever in a voting booth in numerical terms rather than historical terms.

It is the problem of the individual who has no real awareness of the millions of bricks that had to be put into place, one by one, over many centuries in order for him to dwell in the penthouse of freedom. Nor does he see any special obligation to those who built the structure or those who will have to live in it after him, for better or worse.

It is the problem of the individual who recognizes no direct relationship between himself and the decisions made by government in his name. Therefore, he feels no special obligation to dig hard for the information necessary to an understanding of the issues leading to those decisions.

IN SHORT, freedom's main problem is the problem of the individual who takes himself lightly historically—however well-rounded and indeed bloated he may take himself personally.

Having said this, I must admit that there are at least a few contributing factors. The individual is always responsible for the shape or direction a free society may take, but at the same time he is affected or conditioned by the general environment and by the general values he himself has helped to create.

My office is located in the largest city in the world. I look out from my window and see huge slabs of steel, concrete, and glass invading the sky. Many