Valuing Public Opinion: Saskatchewan Policy Actors Weigh In

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1. Introduction

Public opinion research – in its varying forms – is a vital component of democratic decision–making. Although there has been national–level research undertaken in Canada (Petry 2007; Wlezien and Soroka 2004; Page 2006; Butler 2007; others), little focus has been placed on provincial actors and on provincial policy actors' (including elected and non–elected government and staff, stakeholders, media, researchers) uses of public opinion research. How do provincial actors understand public opinion? What measures and sources of public opinion do they classify as valuable, and use in their policy–related work?

Potential answers to these questions will be explored using data from forty questionnaires and thirty interviews conducted with policy actors who were active between 1990 and 2004 in the Saskatchewan higher education policy community - an area of policy that seems to exemplify the disconnect between opinion and policy. Understanding how policy actors defined public opinion can help to clarify what sources and measures of public opinion are important for stakeholders, civil servants, elected officials, the media, and public opinion researchers themselves. This may help to explain connections – and disconnections – between public opinion expressed through polls and public policy.

Also important is how these policy actors assessed the value and utility of particular measures or expressions of public opinion research, and how these assessments have changed over time. Gaining a clearer understanding of how provincial policy actors define and use both public opinion and measures of public opinion will help to address some of the key questions around the relationships between the public and those involved in policymaking.

2. Methodology

This research is part of a larger project, designed to assess Saskatchewan policy actors' perceptions and use of public opinion in tuition fee and student loan policy making. This part of the project focused on the following questions and hypotheses, intended to explore why policy actors may not be responding to the results of public opinion (as operationalized by polling) in the higher education policy areas identified:

1. How do political actors define public opinion?
    What are the most important measures for different groups of actors?
    H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways.
    H2: In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups. It is possible that knowing that the product of the public opinion research is to be automatically publicly released – without waiting for a citizen to submit a Freedom of Information request – may have an impact both on what questions are asked and on the impact of their results.

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Public Opinion

While much public opinion research conflates public opinion with polling, this project conceptualizes public opinion as being expressed in the following ways: through newspaper editorials/opinion pieces, letters to the Editor (newspapers), talk radio: Commentators' Opinions, talk radio: Callers, friends, family, communications from constituents/ those you represented, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another), polling made public by the media, media (in general), interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations.

These elements can all be considered ways to assess public opinion. Media opinion – whether through newspaper editorials or opinion pieces or general media coverage – can be considered a form of communication that can have an impact both on the public and on government (Page 2006; Butler 2007). Talk radio – particularly commentators' opinions – were separated out from general media because they have been considered part of the public opinion spectrum in the United States for some time, and may be considered a source of public opinion in Canada (Barker and Knight 2000; Pan and Kosicki 1997). Communications considered "active forms of opinion expression" – like letters to the editor, communications from constituents, callers into talk radio shows, public protests and demonstrations, participation in public consultations, and voting in elections – are measures of public opinion expressed by those who have an interest or focus on a particular issue or policy area (Page 2006; Petry 2007; Rottinghaus 2007).[1] Elite opinion – conceptualized to include friends and family, as well as lobbying and interest group communication – has been understood by many to have an impact on both policy makers and public policy (Page 2006; Petry 2007). Finally, passive forms of opinion – including polling, no matter who commissions or reports it – are probably the most commonly used measures of public opinion.

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing the Policy Community

Public policy operates within a political, legal, and social context which includes both actors and institutions (Shafritz and Russell 1999). Howlett and Ramesh (2003) identify the whole of those involved in policy making as being members of the "policy universe" – containing "all possible international, state, and social actors and institutions directly or indirectly affecting a specific policy area" (53). The sectoral policy subsystem is drawn from the policy universe, and provides "a space where relevant actors discuss policy issues and persuade and bargain in pursuit of their interests" (53).

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[1] Rottinghaus' (2007) study of public opinion mail in the Johnson White House, for example, emphasized the importance of letters from constituents – particularly in the fact that the people who sent mail differed in the stability, consistency, and favourability of their opinions compared with the mass public.

Others have called these policy actors and their activities the "policy community" (Pross 1986; Coleman and Skogstad 1990a and 1990b; Atkinson and Coleman 1992). Pross (1986) defines the policy community as

> that part of the system that – by virtue of its functional responsibilities, its vested interests, and its specialized knowledge – acquires a dominant voice in determining government decisions in a specific field of public activity, and is generally permitted by society at large and the public authorities in particular to determine public policy in that field (98).

Relatedly, Coleman and Skogstad (1990b) define the policy community "…to include all actors or potential actors with a direct or indirect interest in a policy area of function who share a common "policy focus", and who, with varying degrees of influence shape policy outcomes over the long run" (25). This is the definition used throughout this project. Skogstad (2005) has emphasized this approach's "…empirical description of the *process* of policy-making", which adds additional nuances to the work around public opinion and public policy (56).

There are important classifications that matter to analysis of the policy community. Coleman and Skogstad (1990a and 1990b) build on Pross's (1986) work, speaking of the policy community as being comprised of the sub-government and the attentive public. The sub-government, which makes decisions which lead to public policy, includes government agencies, institutionalized interest associations, and other societal organizations (Pross 1986; Coleman and Skogstad 1990). The attentive public usually contains relevant media and interested and expert individuals, and "…follows and attempts to influence policy, but does not participate in policy-making on a regular basis" (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 26). Much of the literature on policy communities also involves a discussion of policy networks, which describe the "relationship among the particular set of actors that forms around an issue of importance to the policy community" (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 26; see also Atkinson and Coleman 1992). However, this project does not focus on the interrelationships between actors in the community – rather, the emphasis is on which actors comprise the community. Thus, the focus will remain on the policy community, rather than on networks per se.

The policy community – or policy actors and their activities – contains both the sub-government, including elected officials, appointed officials (civil servants), government agencies, and interest groups; and the attentive public, which comprises the public, the mass media, research organizations and think-tanks, and political parties. For the purposes of this project, these actors belong to the following eight groups: elected officials (Cabinet Ministers with Responsibility for Post-Secondary Education and Official Opposition Critics); staff to elected officials (Senior Ministerial Assistants), two groups of senior government officials or the civil service - Deputy Ministers and Assistant and Associate Deputy Ministers, Executive Directors, and Directors of Policy, Programs, and Communications; media (Journalists); public opinion researchers (Pollsters); and two main interest groups - university student union presidents and university presidents.

Data Collection

This project included both a self-administered questionnaire (containing both closed and open-ended questions) and a telephone interview. While the questionnaire focused on the opinions and uses of public opinion in policy community members' work, the semi-structured interview was used to explore questions about trade-offs between policy areas, the nature of the post-secondary education policy sector, and more experiential questions about respondents' work and experiences in the sector. A total of forty respondents participated in the interview process, from eight groups of policy community members. Respondents' participation in either/both the questionnaire and the interviews took place between April 28, 2006 and June 15, 2008.

3. Actors Defining Public Opinion

Understanding how policy actors define public opinion – and which measures they identify as important – is a key research question for this project. We know that defining public opinion can be a difficult proposition, as the literature shows. One of the hypotheses for this project is that political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways, which proves to be the case based on the data presented below.

Assessing how political actors define public opinion was done using a series of questions, both in the interview and in the questionnaire. The first part of this section will address the information gathered through the interview, when participants were asked to define public opinion (I3). The following parts of this section will present findings from the questionnaire: how important participants thought various measures of public opinion were for them in their previous positions (Q4), how important they think that public opinion measures are for decision-makers in general (Q7), and how often they consulted various forms of public opinion (Q5). All responses are presented as frequencies and by policy community group.
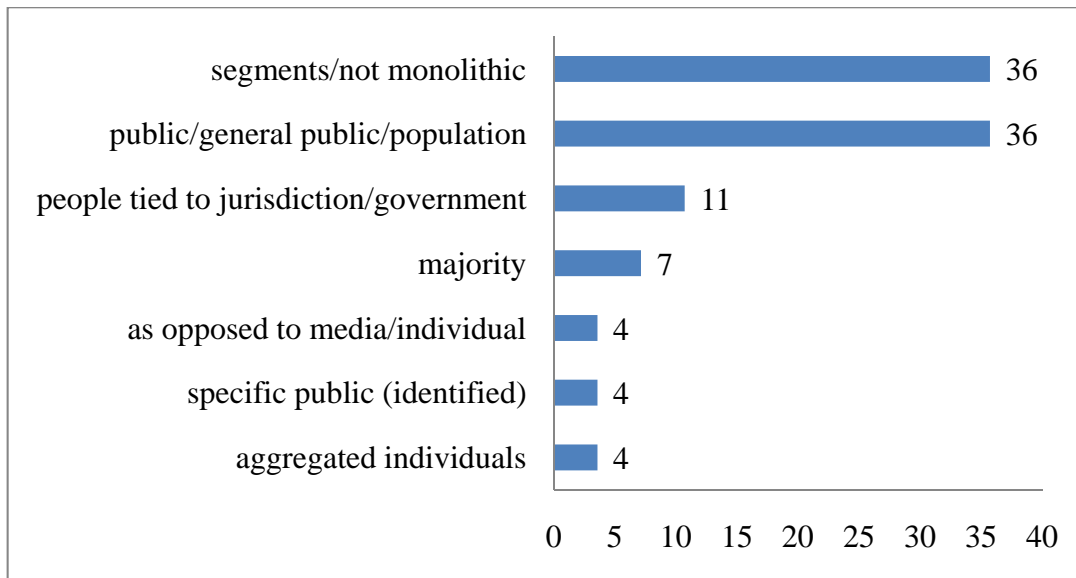
What is Public Opinion?

When asked how they would define public opinion, interviewees provided responses that fell into four broad categories. Their responses focused on the questions who or what is the public (41%, n=28), what is opinion (21%, n=14), what is the focus of public opinion (13%, n=9), and what is important about public opinion measurement (21%, n=14). A final group of responses (4%, n=3) focused on the need to respect or trust public opinion. Given that respondents provided multiple responses to this question, reporting is based on the total number of responses rather than on respondents.

Who or What is the Public?

The largest proportion (41%, n=28) of responses to the question around defining public opinion focused on defining who or what is the public. Among those focusing on defining the public, over one-third (36%, n=10) of interviewees' responses first pointed to the public as either segmented or not monolithic, rather than being homogenous, while an additional one-third of responses (36%, n=10) focused on the public as being "the public", the "general public", or the "general population" (see Figure 1). Over one in ten responses (11%, n=3) pointed to the public

as a people tied to a particular jurisdiction or government, while 7% (n=2) of responses were that the public was the majority. The rest of the interviewees' responses reported that the public was a group defined as separate from the media or individuals (4%, n=1), a specific public of interest (4%, n=1), or an aggregation of individuals (4%, n=1).

Figure 1: Definitions of Public Opinion: Who or What is the Public?
(% of responses)

There are also noticeable differences among the members of the various policy community groups in terms of their assessment of who or what the public is. All of the Ministerial Assistants' responses (n=2) emphasized the public as synonymous with the "general public" or the population. Elected officials were more divided, with one-quarter of responses (25%, n=1) focused on the public as an aggregation of individuals, a further one-quarter of responses (25%, n=1) noting that the public is segmented and not monolithic, while one-half of the responses (50%, n=2) provided pointed to the public as being identified with the population or the general public. Senior civil servants were split as well, with just over one in ten (11%, n=1) of their responses identifying the public as the majority, just over one in ten (11%, n=1) stating that the public was identified in opposition to the media or to the individual, just over one-third (34%, n=3) pointed to the general public or population, and over four in ten (44%, n=4) of the responses emphasized that the public is made up of segments and not monolithic.
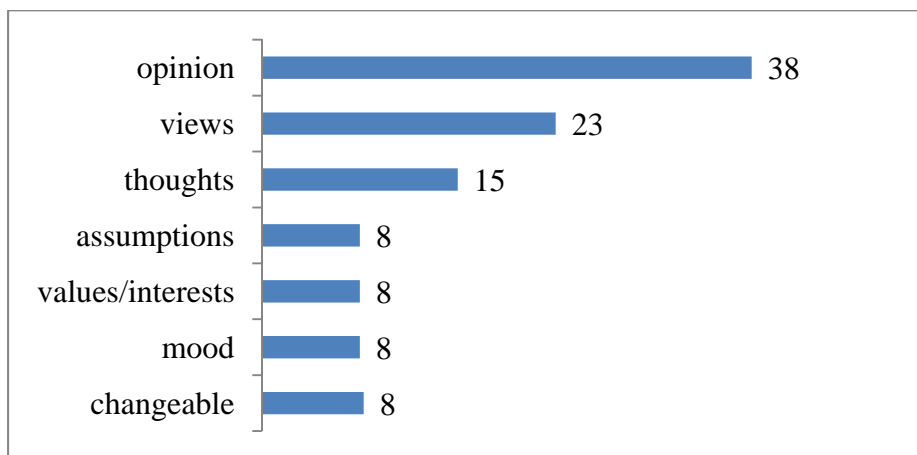
Two-thirds (67%, n=2) of media responses focused on the public being made up of segments and not monolithic, while one-third (33%, n=1) stated that the public was made up of aggregated individuals. All public opinion researchers' responses (n=1) focused on the need to identify the public as being segmented, and not monolithic. University presidents' responses fell equally into four categories: the public as an aggregation of individuals (25%, n=1), as the general public or population (25%, n=1), as segments rather than monolithic (25%, n=1), and as a people tied to a particular jurisdiction or government (25%, n=1). Finally, student presidents' responses were

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perhaps the most varied of all of the groups in the policy community. Over one in ten responses (14%, n=1) focused on the public as majority, the public as segments rather than monolithic (14%, n=1), or the public as a specifically identified group of people (14%, n=1). Just over one-quarter of responses (29%, n=2) identified either the public as general public or population or as people tied to a jurisdiction or government (29%, n=2).

What is Opinion?

Just over two in ten (21%, n=14) of the responses given focused on the nature of opinion, which seemed to be a difficult term to define for the interview participants. Over one-third (38%, n=5) of those responses defined opinion simply as "opinion" (see Figure 2), perhaps speaking to the lack of clarity around public opinion or to the extremely common use of the word opinion. Just under one-quarter (23%, n=3) of responses spoke to opinion as views, while the remaining responses addressed opinion as assumptions (8%, n=1), values/interests (8%, n=1), mood (8%, n=1), or as being changeable (8%, n=1).

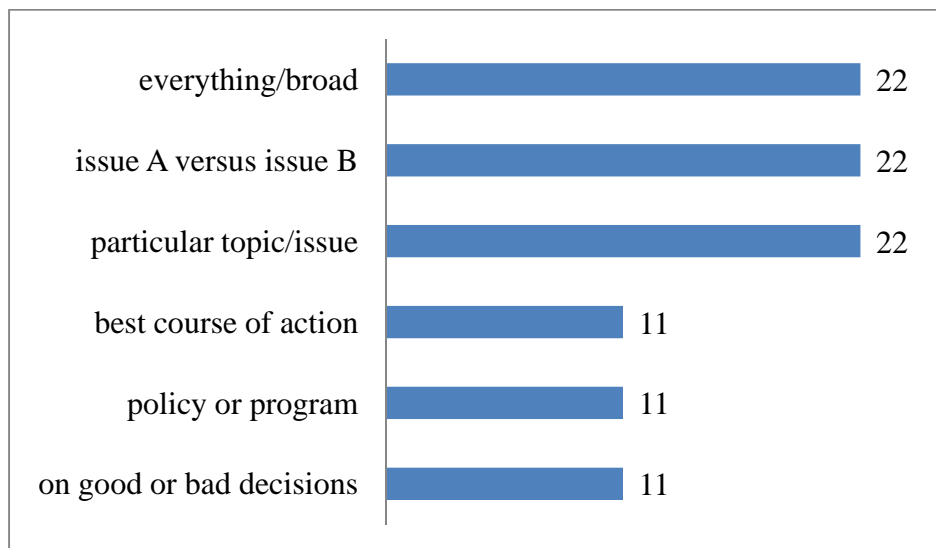**Figure 2: Definitions of Public Opinion: What is Opinion? (% of responses)**

There were some differences among policy community groups when it came to their responses around opinion. Of note, five of the eight groups mentioned something specifically about the nature of opinion: elected officials, senior civil servants, media respondents, university presidents and student union presidents. Elected officials' responses focused on opinion as values/interests (25%, n=1), views (25%, n=1), opinion (25%, n=1), and as changeable (25%, n=1). Senior civil servants' responses pointed to opinion as values/interests (25%, n=1), thoughts (25%, n=1), views (25%, n=1), and opinion (25%, n=1). Media responses identified opinion simply as opinion (100%, n=1). University presidents said that opinion was simply opinion (50%, n=1) and thoughts (50%, n=1), while student union presidents referred to views (50%, n=1) and assumptions (50%, n=1).

What is the Focus of Public Opinion?

Just over one in ten (13%, n=9) of the total responses around how public opinion is defined addressed the focus of public opinion. Of these responses, most responses noted that public opinion addresses everything (22%, n=2), is focused on discussion of issue A versus issue B (22%, n=2), or is focused on a particular issue (22%, n=2) (see Figure 3). The rest pointed to public opinion as being focused around discussion on the best course of action (11%, n=1), a policy or program (11%, n=1), or on good or bad decisions (11%, n=1).

Figure 3: Definitions of Public Opinion: What is the Focus of Public Opinion? (% of responses)

Members of four of the policy community groups had something to say about the focus of public opinion: elected officials, senior civil servants, university presidents, and student presidents. Elected officials' responses were divided among focus on policy or program (33%, n=1), best course of action (33%, n=1), and a particular topic of issue (33%, n=1). Senior civil servants' responses were that public opinion focused on good or bad decisions (33%, n=1) and on everything (67%, n=2) – the broadest perspective of public opinion's focus. University presidents' responses saw public opinion as being focused on issue A versus issue B, while student union presidents' responses were split between public opinion being focused on a particular topic or issue (50%, n=1) or on issue A versus issue B (50%, n=1). It seems that this is a particularly good example of when definitions of public opinion's focus clearly reflect the needs and the focus of members of particular policy community groups.
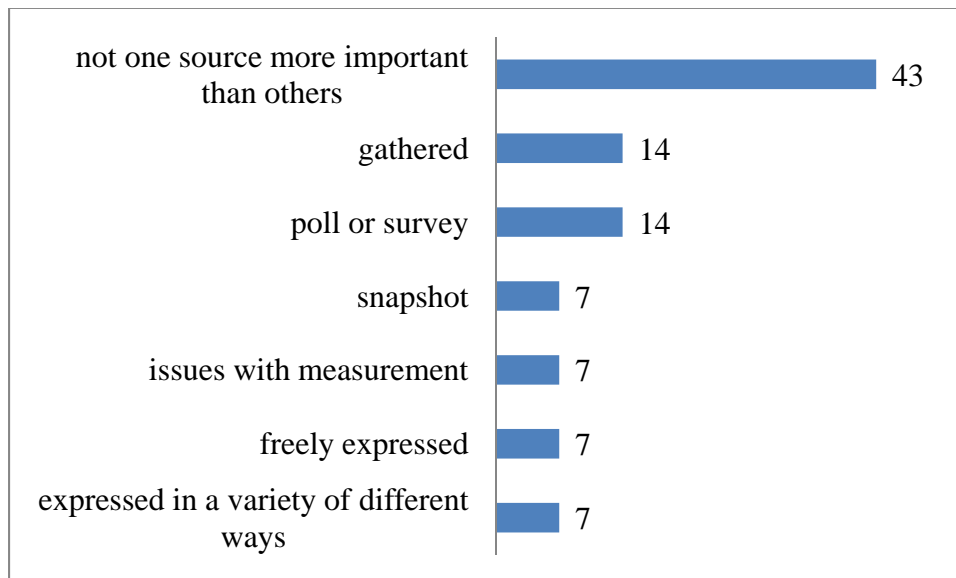
How Public Opinion is Measured

About one-fifth (21%, n=14) of the comments about defining public opinion related to measurement. These comments included the acknowledgement that not one source of public opinion is more important than others (43%, n=6), references to opinion being gathered (14%, n=2), synonymous with a poll or survey (14%, n=2), measurement of opinion as a snapshot (7%,

n=1), being freely expressed (7%, n=1), and expressed in a variety of different ways (7%, n=1). Some responses (7%, n=1) focused on issues with measuring public opinion (see Figure 4 on the next page).

Members of six of the eight policy community groups provided information on measurement when asked about defining public opinion. Ministerial assistants' responses focused on the need to freely express public opinion (50%, n=1) and on public opinion as a snapshot (50%, n=1). Elected officials' responses emphasized that not one source of public opinion is more important than others (67%, n=2) and that public opinion must be gathered (33%, n=1). Senior civil servants stated that not one source is more important than others (33%, n=1), that public opinion is expressed in a variety of different ways (33%, n=1), and that there are issues with measurement (33%, n=1).

Figure 4: Definitions of Public Opinion: Public Opinion Measurement (% of responses)

Public opinion researchers' responses were focused completely on ensuring that not one source is more important than others in public opinion research. University presidents mentioned that not one source is more important than others (33%, n=1), public opinion is synonymous with poll or survey (33%, n=1), and that public opinion can be expressed in a variety of ways (33%, n=1). Finally, student union presidents' responses fell into three themes: public opinion as synonymous with poll or survey (33%, n=1), public opinion as being gathered (33%, n=1), and public opinion being expressed in a variety of different ways (33%, n=1). This focus on a variety of ways of measuring public opinion may indicate a number of things: a love/hate relationship with polling (as will be indicated time and again when respondents talk about the limitations of polling, and the dangers of being too heavily reliant on it); it may also address concerns about relationships with stakeholder groups and the information coming from them vis-à-vis more public sources; it may allow them to ignore certain sources more readily; and finally, it may also reflect concern about the weight of one source over another if it does not support their approach or their position in a particular policy direction.
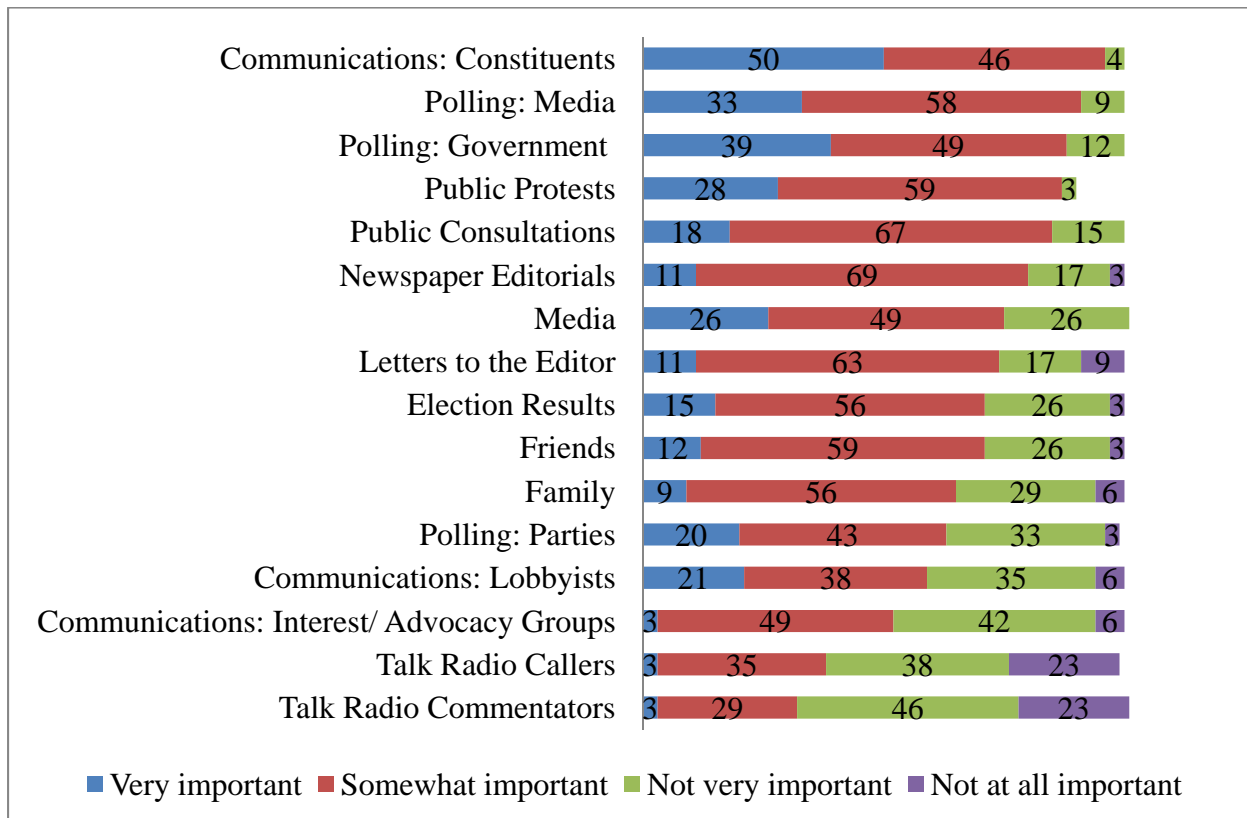
4. Assessing the Importance of Various Measures and Frequency of Their Use

Having provided information on how policy group members define public opinion – including how they understand the public, the nature of opinion, how public opinion is measured, and its focus – we turn to how policy group members think about the overall importance of various public opinion measures, their previous assessment and use of these measures, and what measures are important for decision-makers. Three questions were asked to try to tap into how policy group members assessed the value and utility of public opinion expressions, both for themselves and for decision-makers in general. The results of these questions are explored throughout this section.

Previous Importance of Public Opinion (Q4)

It is anticipated that respondents may have considered certain measures more important than others while they were active in the policy community groups included in this project. These assessments may differ from what they considered to be good reflections of public opinion now (Q3) – particularly since good measures might not be important, and important measures might not be good ones. Thus, this section focuses on how they conceived of various measures of public opinion when they held the positions indicated in this project.

Figure 5: Previous Importance of Public Opinion (% of respondents)

As can be seen in Figure 5 above, respondents were most likely to have identified communications from constituents (96%, n=22), polling made public by the media (91%, n=29), polling commissioned by government (88%, n=28), followed by public protests and demonstrations (87%, n=32), public consultations (85%, n=27), newspaper editorials (80%, n=27), media (75%, n=25), letters to the editor (74%, n=25), election results (71%, n=23), friends (71%, n=23), family (65%, n=21), polling commissioned by parties (63%, n=18), lobbyists' communications (59%, n=19), interest/advocacy group communications (52%, n=16) as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work in the policy community. Fewer than half identified talk radio callers (38%, n=13) or talk radio commentators (32%, n=11) as being very or somewhat important expressions of public opinion in their previous work.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of variation among respondents on this question, chi-square testing was used to assess the relationships between the assessed measures as important expressions of public opinion in their previous work and policy community group membership, presented in rank order by groups as well. Ranking is determined by how many groups agree that a measure of public opinion was an important one in their previous work.

Policy Community Members

All sixteen possible expressions of previously important/not important public opinion were assessed by policy community group. Three of the sixteen showed statistically significant relationships at the p=.05 level: letters to the editor (x^2=16.154, df=7, p=.024; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5), communications from constituents (x^2=24.0, df=7, p=.001; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5), and public protests and demonstrations (x^2=16.485, df=7, p=.021; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5).

For letters to the editor, ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), deputy ministers (50%, n=2), public opinion researchers (50%, n=1), and university presidents (0%) were less likely to indicate that they would have had previously been very or somewhat important in their work. Elected officials (100%, n=2), senior civil servants (100%, n=9), media (100%, n=3), and student union presidents (80%, n=8) were more likely to indicate that they would have had previously been very or somewhat important in their work.

The statistically significant differences among policy community groups were evident when it came to assessing the previous importance of communications from constituents. Seven of the eight groups – ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=1), senior civil servants (100%, n=6), media (100%, n=1), university presidents (100%, n=2), and student union presidents (100%, n=9) – all were more likely than average (96%) to report that communications from constituents were very or somewhat important in their previous work. Only public opinion researchers were less likely (0% compared with 96% overall) to report this. Since the seven groups are the ones most likely to have defined constituents, this result is in line with expectations.

For public protests and demonstrations, ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), senior civil servants (100%, n=9), media (100%,

n=3), university presidents (100%, n=3), and student union presidents (100%, n=9) were more likely to report that they were somewhat or very important in their previous work, while public opinion researchers (50%, n=1) were less likely to do so.

One of the sixteen expressions of previously important/not important public opinion showed statistically significant relationships at the p=.10 level: media communications (x^2=12.547, df=7, p=.084; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5). For media communications, ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), media (100%, n=3), and student union presidents (90%, n=9) were more likely to have reported these as being very or somewhat important, while elected officials (0%), senior civil servants (56%, n=5), public opinion researchers (50%, n=1), and university presidents (67%, n=2) were less likely to have done so.

However, although there were no other statistically significant differences, there were noticeable distinctions and commonalities among policy community groups when it came to opinions about the importance (very or somewhat, not very or not at all) of various expressions of public opinion as a reflection of public opinion in their previous policy community work. These distinctions and commonalities are presented by policy community group below.

Ministerial Assistants
Although a very small group (n=2), Ministerial Assistants assessed expressions of public opinion remarkably similarly. They were quite different from other policy community groups because of their cohesion around the nine expressions that they considered were very or somewhat good reflections of public opinion. Both agreed that newspaper editorials, communications from constituents, polling commission by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations were very or somewhat important to them in their previous work as Ministerial Assistants in the post-secondary education field.

The Ministerial Assistants were split on the importance of the following expressions of public opinion: letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, friends, family, lobbyists' communications, and election results. This may be a reflection of some of the Ministerial Assistants' personal characteristics and their different portfolios, even though they were active around the same time and worked for the same Minister.[2]

Elected Officials
Ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education (n=2) agreed on the importance (very or somewhat) of eleven expressions of public opinion for them as ministers. These included newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. They also agreed that talk radio commentators and

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[2] This may also be a reflection of the work that the two Ministerial Assistants currently do now; both inside and outside of government.

media communications were not very or not at all important for them in their work as ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education.

However, there was disagreement on the importance of talk radio callers, interest/advocacy group communications, and lobbyists' communications, with one respondent considering these important and the other not important. This may be a product (in part) of the time each of these ministers was serving, and the issues within the policy community at the time. It may also reflect their interpersonal relationships within the community.

Deputy Ministers
Seven of the sixteen expressions of public opinion were considered very or somewhat important by all of the deputy minister respondents (n=4). These included newspaper editorials, communications from constituents, polling commission by the provincial government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations.

Two-thirds of the deputy minister respondents (67%, n=2) identified polling commissioned by political parties, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications as being very or somewhat important, while half (50%, n=2) reported that letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, and election results as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work as deputy ministers in post-secondary education. One-third considered talk radio callers, friends, and family as being very or somewhat important. There were no expressions of public opinion that were considered not very or not at all important by all of the deputy ministers.

Senior Public Servants
Senior public servants (n=9) agreed on four expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important in their previous work in the public service: letters to the editor, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, and public protests and demonstrations. Between three-quarters and nine in ten of the public servants reported the following expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important in previous work: newspaper editorials (89%, n=8); polling made public/commissioned by the media (88%, n=7); polling commissioned by political parties (83%, n=5); friends (78%, n=7); family (78%, n=7); and election results (78%, n=7).

Just over half (56%, n=7) of the public servants identified media communications as being very or somewhat important in their previous work. Under half reported the following as being very or somewhat important: talk radio callers (44%, n=4); interest/advocacy group communications (44%, n=4); and talk radio commentators (33%, n=3). There were no expressions of public opinion that public servants all agreed were not at all or not very important in their previous work.

Media
All media respondents (n=3) agreed on seven expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work: letters to the editor, friends, family,

communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, and public protests and demonstrations. Two of the three identified newspaper editorials, talk radio callers, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, lobbyists' communications, election results, and public consultations as being very or somewhat important for them in their work.

All three reported that talk radio commentators and interest/advocacy group communications were not very or not at all important for them in their previous work as media personnel reporting on post-secondary education.

Public Opinion Researchers
The two public opinion researchers agreed that polling commissioned by the provincial government and polling made public/commissioned by the media were very or somewhat important for their previous work. However, the two were split on the importance of eleven of the sixteen measures of public opinion: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations.

Both agreed that friends, family, and communications from constituents were not very or not at all important for them in their previous work as public opinion researchers working in the policy community.

University Presidents
The three university presidents agreed on three of the measures of public opinion as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work as university presidents: communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, and public protests and demonstrations. Two of the three identified newspaper editorials, friends, polling commissioned by the provincial government, media communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, and public consultations as being very or somewhat important for them.

One out of the three pointed to talk radio commentators and family as being very or somewhat important for their previous work, while all agreed that talk radio callers, polling commissioned by political parties, interest/advocacy group communications were not very or not at all important for their previous work.

Student Union
The student union representatives (n=10) fully agreed on three measures of public opinion as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work with the student unions: communications from constituents, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. These expressions of opinion are likely to reflect the focus of many student union presidents during this time. There was a great deal of diversity within this group in terms of what they assessed as important or not important. Between three-quarters and nine in ten assessed media communications (90%, n=9), letters to the editor (80%, n=8), friends (80%, n=8), polling commissioned by the provincial government (78%, n=7), polling made public/commissioned by
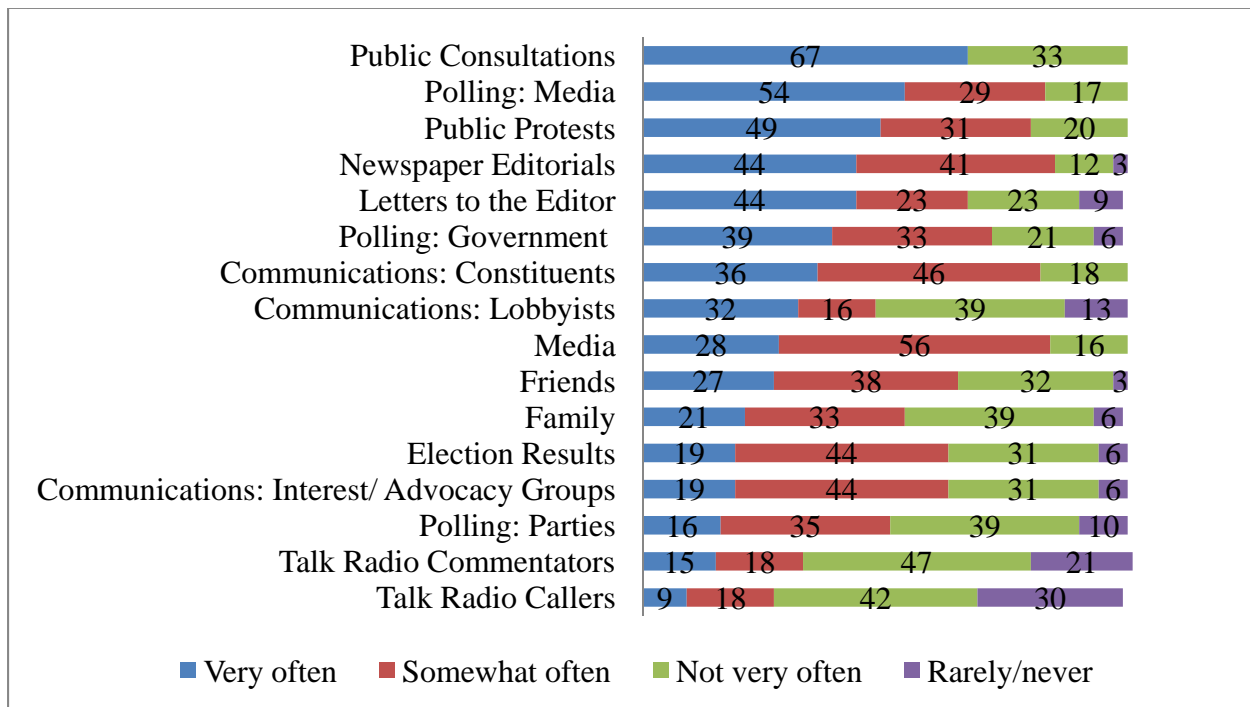
the media (78%, n=7), interest/advocacy group communications (78%, n=7), and election results (78%, n=7) as being somewhat or very important for their previous work with the student unions.

Between half and three-quarters reported that newspaper editorials (70%, n=7), family (70%, n=7), polling commissioned by political parties (56%, n=5), and lobbyists' communications (50%, n=5) were very or somewhat important for their previous work. Fewer than half pointed to talk radio commentators (30%, n=3) or talk radio callers (30%, n=3) as being very or somewhat important. There were no expressions of public opinion that all former student union presidents considered not at all or not very important.

5. How Often Respondents Consulted Public Opinion (Q5)

An indication of how important a measure of public opinion is for a policy community member is how frequently they consulted it. While respondents may not have considered a measure "good" for the work they were doing at the time, it may still have been frequently observed. There are limitations to this approach, however, as information may only be observed as frequently as it is made available or accessible.

Figure 6: How Often Respondents Consulted Public Opinion (% of respondents)

	Very often	Somewhat often	Not very often	Rarely/never
Public Consultations	67		33	
Polling: Media	54	29	17	
Public Protests	49	31	20	
Newspaper Editorials	44	41	12	3
Letters to the Editor	44	23	23	9
Polling: Government	39	33	21	6
Communications: Constituents	36	46	18	
Communications: Lobbyists	32	16	39	13
Media	28	56	16	
Friends	27	38	32	3
Family	21	33	39	6
Election Results	19	44	31	6
Communications: Interest/ Advocacy Groups	19	44	31	6
Polling: Parties	16	35	39	10
Talk Radio Commentators	15	18	47	21
Talk Radio Callers	9	18	42	30

As can be seen in Figure 6 above, respondents were most likely to report consulting newspaper editorials (85%, n=28), media (84%, n=26), polling made public by the media (83%, n=28), communications from constituents (82%, n=17), public protests and demonstrations (80%, n=28), followed by consulting polling commissioned by government (72%, n=23), public consultations (67%, n=2), letters to the editor (67%, n=22), friends (65%, n=21), election results

(63%, n=19), interest/advocacy group communications (63%, n=20), family (54%, n=17), and polling commissioned by parties (51%, n=15) either very or somewhat often. Fewer than half identified lobbyists' communications (48%, n=15), talk radio commentators (33%, n=11) and talk radio callers (27%, n=9) as being measures of public opinion consulted very or somewhat often.

Policy Community Membership

In order to gain a clearer understanding of variation among respondents on this question, chi-square testing was used to assess the relationships between how often the assessed measures of public opinion were consulted and policy community group membership. There were some significant differences among the members of the policy community. The relationship between newspaper editorials and policy community was significant at the .05 level (x^2=14.268; df= 7; p=.047; 88% with cells less than 5), while the relationships between friends and policy community (x^2=12.155; df=7; p=.096; 100% with cells less than 5) and public consultations and policy community (x^2=3; df=1; p=.083; 100% with cells less than 5) were significant at the .10 level.

Ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), media (100%, n=3), and university presidents (100%, n=3) were much more likely to indicate that they consulted newspaper editorials very or somewhat often. Senior public servants were slightly more likely to indicate that they consulted newspaper editorials very or somewhat often (88%, n=7). Public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) were much less likely and student union representatives (80%, n=8) were slightly less likely to consult newspaper editorials often.

Elected officials (100%, n=2), media (100%, n=3), university presidents (100%, n=3), and student union representatives (80%, n=8) were more likely than average (65%) to report that they consulted friends very or somewhat often. Ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), deputy ministers (33%, n=1), senior public servants (44%, n=4), and public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) were less likely than average (65%) to report that they consulted friends as an expression of public opinion very or somewhat often.

Relatively few respondents overall reported that public consultations were consulted very or somewhat often, but deputy ministers (100%, n=2) were much more likely than public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) to have indicated that they did consult public consultations very or somewhat often. This may be a reflection of the time period in which the various respondents were active, since public consultations on post-secondary education did not take place regularly throughout this time period.

Ministerial Assistants
Not surprisingly, both Ministerial Assistants reported that they had consulted newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, election

results, and public protests and demonstrations very or somewhat often. The need to be aware of the political environment would be paramount for Ministerial Assistants.

One of the two Ministerial Assistants reported that they would consult talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, friends, family, and communications from constituents very or somewhat often. Neither reported following public consultations at all, which, as with other respondents, may reflect the lack of public consultations held in this particular policy area.

Elected Officials
Elected officials (n=2) reported consulting eight different expressions of public opinion very or somewhat often: polling made public/commissioned by the media, election results, public protests and demonstrations, newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, family, and communications from constituents. One of the two elected officials stated that they very or somewhat often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, and lobbyists' communications. None of the elected officials reported consulting talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, or public consultations often.

Deputy Ministers
Deputy Ministers (n=4) reported that they had consulted seven different expressions of public opinion very or somewhat often: newspaper editorials, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations.

Between half and three-quarters of the deputy ministers reported that they often consulted talk radio commentators (75%, n=3), talk radio callers (67%, n=2), interest/advocacy group communications (67%, n=2), and letters to the editor (50%, n=2). Fewer than half reported consulting friends (33%, n=1), polling commissioned by political parties (33%, n=1), lobbyists' communications (33%, n=1), or election results (33%, n=1) very or somewhat often.

Senior Public Servants
Senior public servants (n=8) differed in terms of how often they reported consulting particular expressions of public opinion. Between three-quarters and nine in ten reported consulting newspaper editorials (88%, n=7), polling commissioned by the provincial government (88%, n=7), public protests and demonstrations (78%, n=7), letters to the editor (75%, n=6), communications from constituents (75%, n=3), and polling made public/commissioned by the media (75%, n=6) very or somewhat often. Half to three-quarters reported that they had consulted media communications (63%, n=5), lobbyists' communications (63%, n=5), election results (56%, n=5), and family (50%, n=4) very or somewhat often. Fewer than half indicated that friends (44%, n=4), interest/advocacy group communications (44%, n=4), polling commissioned by political parties (43%, n=4), talk radio callers (38%, n=3), talk radio commentators (25%, n=2), or public consultations (0%, n=0) were consulted very or somewhat often.

Media

Media respondents (n=3) agreed that they had consulted nine different expressions of public opinion very or somewhat often: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, family, communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, election results, and public protests and demonstrations. Two-thirds (n=2) reported consulting talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, and lobbyists' communications very or somewhat often during their time working in this area.

None (0%) of the media group reported observing interest/advocacy group communications or public consultations, which is more than likely a product of what stories they were working on at the time – particularly since Saskatchewan journalists were largely expected to be "jacks/jills of all trades" rather than focusing on post-secondary education, for example – and what activities were occurring at the time than of their interest in or observation of current government and policy community activities.

Public Opinion Researchers

As might be anticipated due in part to their role(s) in the policy community, both public opinion researchers reported very little consultation per se of various forms of public opinion. One of the two respondents reported consulting polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and polling commissioned by the provincial government very or somewhat often. However, both public opinion researchers agreed that they consulted newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, friends, family, communications from constituents, and public consultations very little or not at all during this time period.

University Presidents

University presidents (n=3) agreed that they consulted newspaper editorials, friends, communications from constituents, and public protests and demonstrations very or somewhat often during their tenure. Two-thirds (n=2) reported consulting family very or somewhat often as a source of public opinion. One in three (33%, n=1) reported consulting letters to the editor, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, and lobbyists' communications. No university president reported consulting polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, election results, and public consultations very or somewhat often.

Student Union

There was a great deal of diversity among student union representatives (n=10), in terms of how often they consulted various forms of public opinion. All agreed that they consulted polling made public/commissioned by the media very or somewhat often. Over three-quarters reported that they consulted media communications (90%, n=9), communications from constituents (89%, n=8), newspaper editorials (80%, n=8), and friends (80%, n=8) very or somewhat often.

Between half and three-quarters mentioned letters to the editor (70%, n=7), polling commissioned by the provincial government (67%, n=6), polling commissioned by political parties (67%, n=6), election results (67%, n=6), public protests and demonstrations (60%, n=6), and interest/advocacy group communications (56%, n=5) as being expressions of public opinion that were very or somewhat often consulted. Fewer than half reported that lobbyists' communications (33%, n=3), talk radio commentators (30%, n=3), talk radio callers (10%, n=1), or public consultations (0%, n=0) were very or somewhat often consulted as part of their work as student union representatives. As with other policy community groups, paying attention to infrequently-occurring events like public consultations is likely to vary with the timeframe respondents were involved in the policy community.

6. Impact of Public Opinion Polling Being Regularly Released to the Public
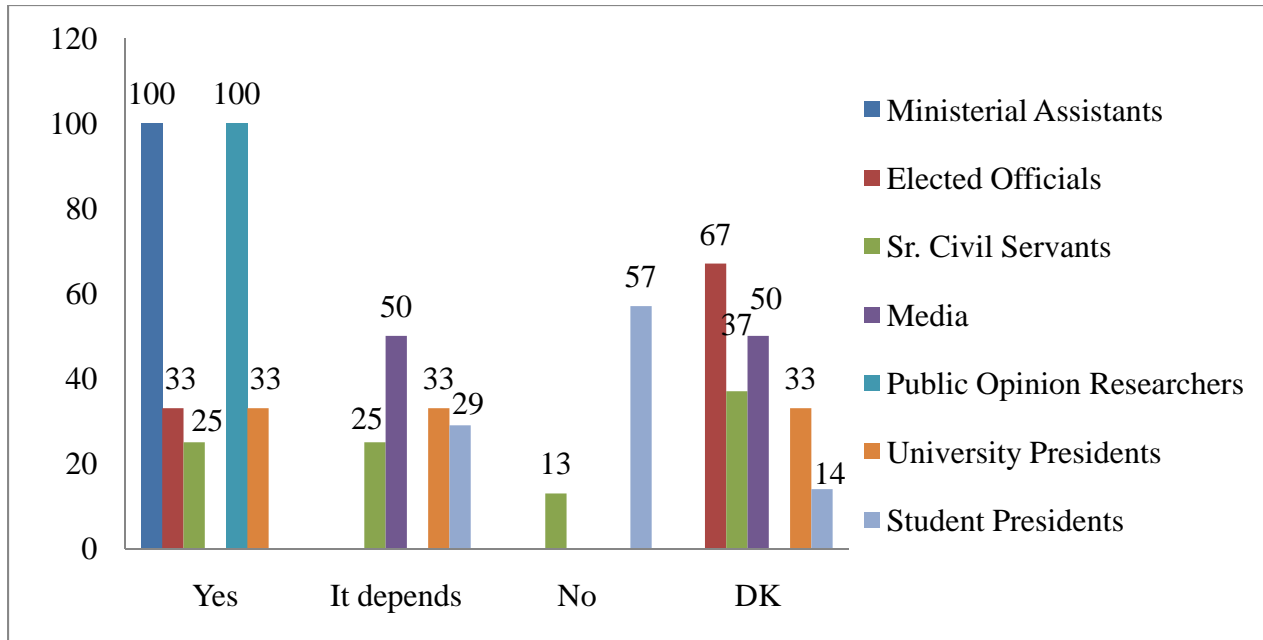
Between 1991 and 2004, Saskatchewan was one of the only provinces in Canada that regularly released quantitative public opinion research results. Given that this information must be released publicly, it seems possible that governments may not ask questions that they are unsure about – or do not want to speak publicly about. This kind of research may have less value for policy makers, since they may be limited in the type and number of questions they may want asked. I asked respondents two questions about this issue: one in the questionnaire that asked about the value of the polling results if they are released or not released, and one in the interview that asked whether or not polling results would have more impact if they were not released.

When asked whether polling results would be more or less *valuable* if they were not released publicly, the majority – 85% – of questionnaire respondents (n=11) said that the release of this public opinion research made it more valuable, rather than less valuable. A total of 15% (n=2) of questionnaire respondents reported that they thought it made the research less valuable. Although there are no statistically significant relationship between whether public release of polling results made it more or less valuable and policy community group, there are observable differences. Ministerial assistants (100%, n=1), deputy ministers (100%, n=3), senior civil servants (100%, n=3), media (100%, n=1), and university presidents (100%, n=2) were more likely to say that releasing public opinion results made it more valuable, while elected officials (50%, n=1) and public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) were less likely to say so. Student union presidents did not answer this question.

When asked whether it would have more *impact* if not released, responses from interview respondents differed slightly from those in the questionnaire. This may reflect either the wording – impact versus value – of the polling, and for whom the value or impact would accrue. Impact can imply use by opposition parties, stakeholder groups, media, and the public; while value may refer to value gained by the respondents for the work that they did – and the contribution (as they say it) to the public good. As it was, just under half – 43% (n=17) – said that polling would have more impact if it weren't released publicly, while over half (53%, n=21) said that it wouldn't have more impact. A very small proportion 1% (n=2) – reported that it would depend. An additional 31% did not know or did not specify.

There are differences among the policy community groups as well when it comes to how they assessed the impact of polling if it was not released (see Figure 7). Responses from ministerial assistants (100%, n=5), public opinion researchers (100%, n=1), elected officials (33%, n=3) and university presidents (33%, n=1) were more likely to say that polling would have more impact if it was not released, while senior civil servants (25%, n=5), media (0%, n=0), and student union presidents (0%, n=0) were less likely to say so.
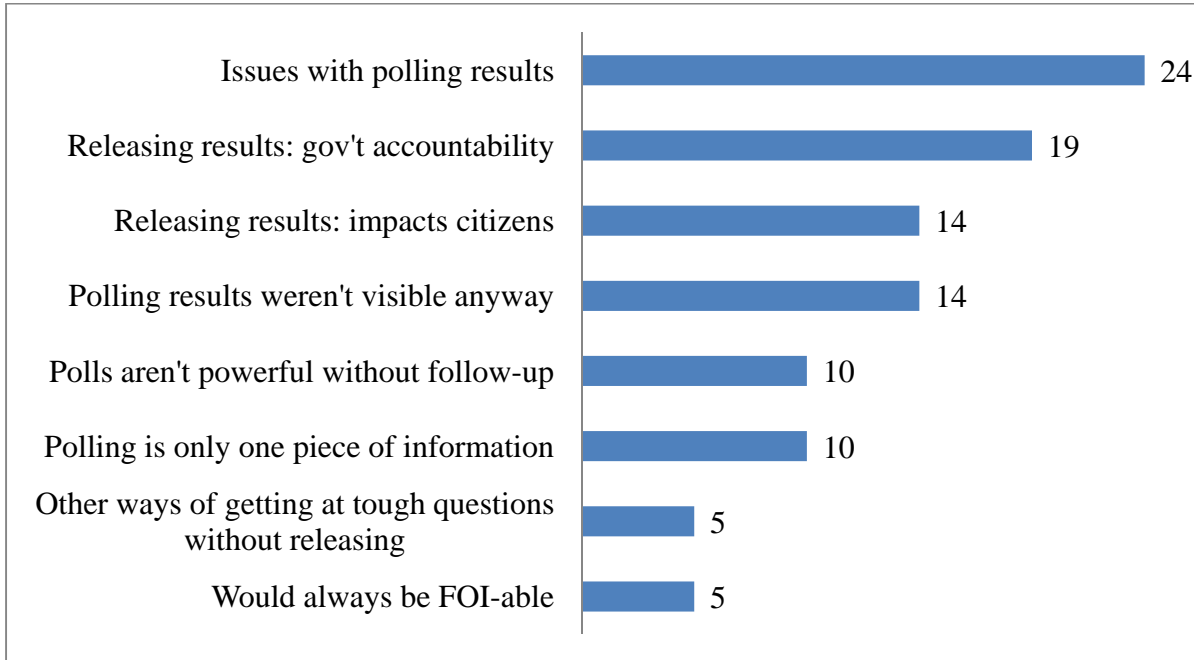
Figure 7: Would Polling Have More Impact if Not Released?
(% of Respondents by Policy Community Group)

Responses from the media (100%, n=2) were the only ones to say that polling may have more impact – it depends. Student union presidents (58%, n=6) were more likely to report that polling would not have more impact if it were not released publicly, while all other groups were less likely to say so. Lastly, elected officials (67%, n=), media (50%, n=), senior civil servants (38%, n=), and university presidents (33%, n=) were more likely to say that they did not know or did not answer than student union presidents (14%, n=), ministerial assistants (0%, n=0), and public opinion researchers (0%, n=0).

Despite the fact that about one-third of interview responses seemed clear on whether or not they thought public release would change the impact of government polling research, there was a great deal of variation in respondents' thoughts on this issue. Respondents provided twenty explanations as to why polling may not have more impact if it were not released – or even have less impact – as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Why Polling *Would Not* Have More Impact if Not Released (% of responses)

Category	Value
Issues with polling results	24
Releasing results: gov't accountability	19
Releasing results: impacts citizens	14
Polling results weren't visible anyway	14
Polls aren't powerful without follow-up	10
Polling is only one piece of information	10
Other ways of getting at tough questions without releasing	5
Would always be FOI-able	5

The largest proportion (24%, n=5) of responses indicated that because there are inherent issues with polling – and with the results one achieves – that it would not make any difference whether or not it was released publicly or not. They argued that these inherent problems, whether attributable to question design or sample selection, meant that polling would have limited impact whether or not it was released publicly. Another group of responses (14%, n=3) stated that polling results were not visible to the public anyway, so withholding them would make no difference to the public. Others noted that polling is only as powerful as the follow-up associated with them (10%, n=2), and that polling is only one piece of information (10%, n=2) for decision-makers. Lastly, of those responses that indicated not publicly releasing or publicly releasing polling would not matter, respondents pointed out that the information would always be accessible to the public under the Freedom of Information Act (5%, n=1) and that policy makers will always find ways at getting at tough questions without releasing that information (5%, n=1). Focus groups (exempt from the public release policy) and having polling done by political parties are two examples of how this might happen.

However, some responses focused on how public opinion polling would have less impact if it were not released publicly, focusing both on the potential influence publicly-released polling could have on the public and on the benefits it provides for government. One-third (33%, n=) of responses highlighted that by releasing polling results, government actually increased accountability (19%, n=4) and impacted citizens' opinions (14%, n=3). Thus, if government did not release results, it would lose this avenue to impact opinion and increase accountability.

There are differences among the policy community groups when it comes to assessing why polling would have the same or a lesser impact if it were to be held back from the public (see Table 1). Responses from senior civil servants are more likely to note that any public opinion research done would be subject to freedom of information requests (17%, n=1) and to argue that there are other ways of getting at tough questions without releasing research results (17%, n=1). Some of the senior civil servants (17%, n=1) and student union presidents (17%, n=1) stated that polling is only one piece of information for decision making, so it was less likely to make a difference if it was to be held back. Student union presidents (33%, n=2) noted that polls are not tremendously powerful for decision making if they are not followed up on. Some media (25%, n=1) and student union presidents (33%, n=2) also noted that the public opinion polls government releases were not that visible anyway, so that holding them back might not even be noticed. Lastly, ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), senior public servants (17%, n=1), media (25%, n=1), and university presidents (100%, n=2) noted that there are issues with polling results, so that holding them back would not necessarily make any difference as decision makers would be aware of those issues.
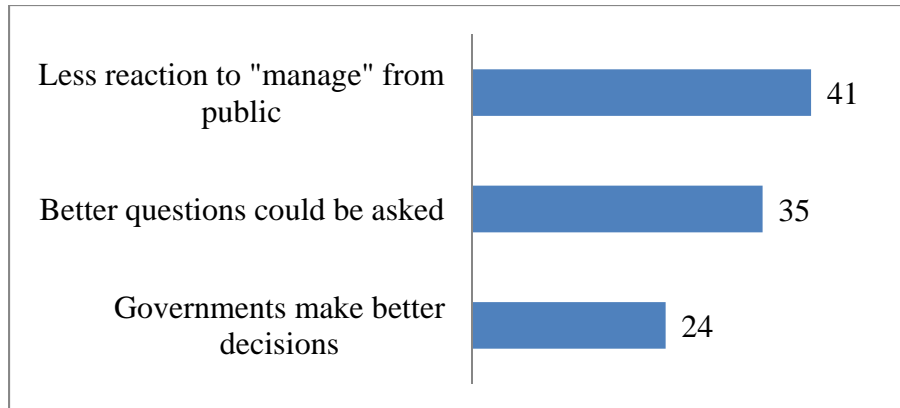
Among those who noted that polling results may have less impact if they were held back and not released, elected officials (100%, n=1), some media (25%, n=1), and student union president (17%, n=1) responses focused on the role of public opinion results in impacting citizens. Others – ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), senior civil servants (33%, n=2), and media (25%, n=1) – pointed to the role that public opinion polling results can play in supporting government accountability.

Table 1: Why Would Polling Have the Same (or Lesser) Impact if Not Released? Percentage of Responses by Policy Community Group (Number of Responses)

	MAs	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	Media	Univ. Pres	SU Pres
Would always be FOI-able			17 (1)			
Other ways of getting at tough questions without releasing			17 (1)			
Polling is only one piece of information			17 (1)			17 (1)
Polls aren't powerful without follow-up						33 (2)
Polling results weren't visible anyway				25 (1)		33 (2)
Releasing results: impacts citizens		100 (1)		25 (1)		17 (1)
Releasing results: government accountability	50 (1)		33 (2)	25 (1)		
Issues with polling results	50 (1)		17 (1)	25 (1)	100 (2)	

A second group of responses focused on the reasons why public opinion polling would have a greater impact if it did not have to be publicly released (see Figure 9). The greatest proportion of responses (41%, n=) focused on the government having less reaction to manage from the public and from stakeholders. The second most common response (35%, n=) was that government could ask better questions if the polling results did not have to be released. Finally, another group of responses (24%, n=) centred on the idea that governments would make better decisions if polling results were not released.

Figure 9: Why Polling *Would* Have More Impact if Not Released

There are differences among the policy community groups when it comes to assessing why polling would not have a greater impact if it were to be held back from the public (see Table 2). Student union presidents (50%, n=1), ministerial assistants (40%, n=2), and senior civil servants (20%, n=1) said that governments make better decisions when they can access polling information that does not have to be made public. The question then becomes *why* this is the case: perhaps because government can ask *better* questions. Four of the groups' responses focused on this ability to ask better questions: public opinion researchers (100%, n=1), elected officials (67%, n=2), senior civil servants (40%, n=2), and ministerial assistants (20%, n=1). Last, responses from five groups suggested that if public opinion polling was not publicly released, then government would have less reaction to manage from the public and from stakeholders: university presidents (100%, n=1), student union presidents (50%, n=1), ministerial assistants (40%, n=2), senior civil servants (40%, n=1), and elected officials (33%, n=1).

Table 2: Why Would Polling Have More Impact if Not Released?
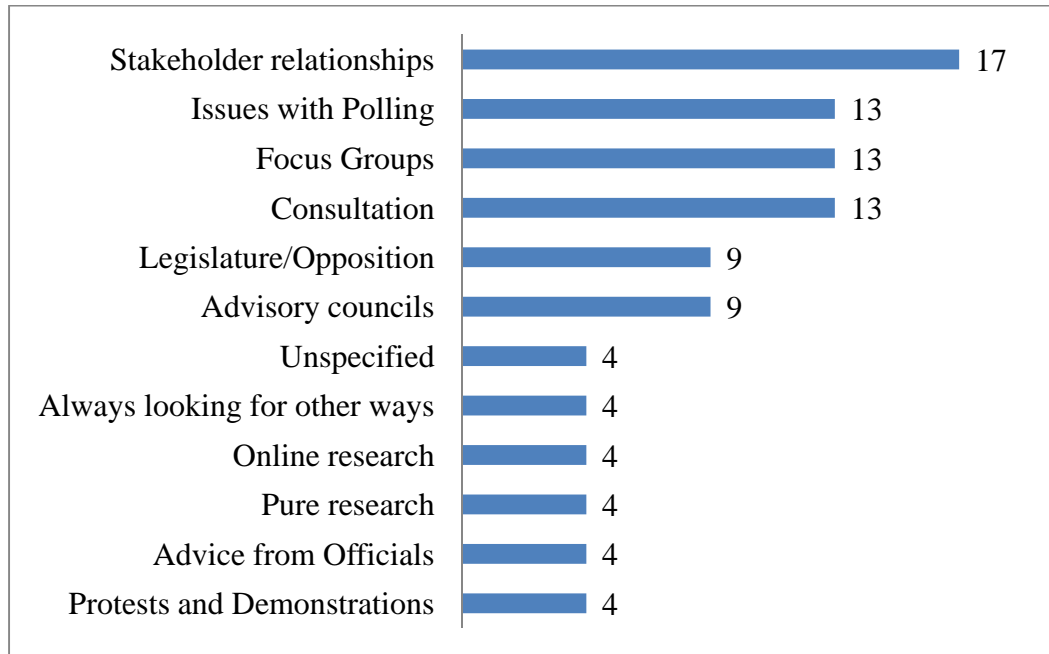**Percentage of Responses by Policy Community Group**

	MAs	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	PORs	Univ. Pres	SU Pres
Governments make better decisions	40 (2)		20 (2)			50 (1)
Better questions could be asked	20 (1)	67 (2)	40 (2)	100 (1)		
Less reaction to "manage" from public	40 (2)	33 (1)	40 (1)		100 (1)	50 (1)

Given the limitations of polling identified by respondents and the challenges many identified around the policy to release public opinion polling results, I asked interview respondents whether or not other forms of measurement had become more popular as a result of this particular requirement. Of the respondents (n=14), 21% (n=3) said that other forms of measurement had become more popular; 57% (n=8) said that there were forms that had become more popular, but that polling was still relevant and important; and 21% (n=3) said that polling remained the most popular form of public opinion measurement.

When asked to specify what forms of public opinion measurement had become more popular because of the policy requiring release of quantitative public opinion research results, respondents provided a range of options (see Figure 10). Smaller proportions of respondents indicated that protests and demonstrations (4%, n=1), advice from officials (4%, n=1), pure research (4%, n=1), online research (4%, n=1), other forms of research that would boost representation (4%, n=1), and unspecified others (4%, n=1). A larger proportion said that Advisory councils (9%, n=2) and the Legislature/Opposition (9%, n=2) were very important alternatives to public opinion polling. Next were consultation (13%, n=3) and focus groups (13%, n=3), with an additional 13% (n=3) indicating that there were so many problems with polling – particularly around representation and sampling – that they had to look for alternatives.

The largest proportion of responses – 17% (n=4) – indicated that stakeholder relationships and communications had become more popular because of the requirement to release public opinion polling results. However, it is likely that many of these have always been important – it is just when respondents are asked to compare them against the need to release public opinion polling that they seem to have become more important. And while they may have always been important, their importance may be further highlighted in the context of the automatic release of polling information.

Figure 10: Other Forms of Public Opinion Measurement That Have Become More Popular (% of responses)

Category	Value
Stakeholder relationships	17
Issues with Polling	13
Focus Groups	13
Consultation	13
Legislature/Opposition	9
Advisory councils	9
Unspecified	4
Always looking for other ways	4
Online research	4
Pure research	4
Advice from Officials	4
Protests and Demonstrations	4

There were some differences among the policy community groups when it came to identifying what methods of assessing public opinion had become more important (see Figure 5.5.4). One-third of student union presidents (33%, n=1) pointed to protests and demonstrations as becoming more important.   One-third of elected officials (33%, n=1) mentioned advice from Officials as being increasingly more important. Just under one in ten (8%, n=1) senior civil servants pointed to the value of pure research, which could be undertaken in a less politicized environment than the polling. Public opinion researchers (25%, n=1) mentioned online research, while student union presidents (33%, n=1) remarked that they were always looking for ways other than polling to measure public opinion.

Some of the senior civil servants (8%, n=1) and public opinion researchers (25%, n=1) specified that advisory councils had become more important – likely reflecting the time in the 1991-2004 period where they were more active in this policy area, while elected officials (33%, n=1) and other senior civil servants (8%, n=1) pointed to the value of the Legislature and of the Opposition. Consultation was mentioned by one-quarter (25%, n=3) of senior civil servants, while focus groups were mentioned by senior civil servants (17%, n=2) and by public opinion researchers (25%, n=1). While some senior civil servants (8%, n=1), public opinion researchers (25%, n=1), and all media (100%, n=2) respondents indicated that there were many issues with polling that required governments to think about other ways to assess public opinion, elected officials (33%, n=1), senior civil servants (17%, n=2), and student union presidents (33%, n=1) emphasized the increased importance of stakeholder relationships.

Table 3: Other Forms of Public Opinion Measurement That Have Become More Popular, by Policy Community Group (% of responses by group (number of respondents)

	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	Media	PORs	SU Pres
Stakeholder relationships	33 (1)	17 (2)			33 (1)
Issues with polling		8 (1)	100 (2)	25 (1)	
Focus groups		17 (2)		25 (1)	
Consultation		25 (3)			
Legislature/Opposition	33 (1)	8 (1)			
Advisory Councils		8 (1)		25 (1)	
Unspecified		8 (1)			
Always looking for other ways					33 (1)
Online research				25 (1)	
Pure research		8 (1)			
Advice from Officials	33 (1)				
Protests and demonstrations					33 (1)

Several respondents noted that no other forms of public opinion measurement (n=8) had become more popular because of the requirements to release the polling results, or that some had become more popular, but polling still remained an important part of the government's toolbox. These respondents focused primarily on the value of polling (75%, n=6). They noted that telephone polling is still the best way to measure public opinion – particularly over time. They argued that it allows for the assessment of what the general public is thinking, versus particular groups. It also allows government to "float balloons" – which many respondents equate with government having nothing to hide by doing so. It is important to note that this might reflect certain methodological considerations of the Saskatchewan context as well: until quite recently, Saskatchewan telephone survey response rates remained quite high – and it has been possible to maintain a scientifically precise sampling frame within the southern part of the province (the most populous area). It is only quite recently that the survey world has grown to include a Saskatchewan-grown powerful and active on-line research company to provide a "threat" to the other well-established telephone-based firms.

Others pointed out that the requirement to release polling results hasn't made other forms of research more popular, but it has ensured that people think more carefully about the research they're doing (13%, n=1) – and that it makes people think about the costs associated with other research, like focus groups (13%, n=1).

Table 4: Why Other Forms of Public Opinion Measurement Have Not Become More Popular, Percentage of Responses by Policy Community Group (Number of Respondents)

	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	Media	PORs
Value of Polling	100 ( )	67 (2)	67 (2)	100 ( )
Think More Carefully about Research		33 (1)		
Focus groups costly			33 (1)	

Most of the respondents indicating that other forms of public opinion measurement have not become more popular than public opinion polling focused on the value of polling overall for decision makers (Table 4 above). All elected officials (100%, n=1), public opinion researchers (100%, n=1), and two-thirds of the senior civil servants (67%, n=2) and media (67%, n=2) respondents focused on the value of polling overall. A small proportion of senior civil servants (33%, n=1) indicated that this requirement has made government think more carefully about how it conducts research, but that it hasn't changed the popularity of polling. One-third of media respondents (33%, n=1) pointed out that focus groups are costly, which helps to keep polling more popular. Two media respondents (67%, n=2) also noted that the impact of polling – whether released publicly or not – may depend on the particular policy makers or on the topics presented in the polling results.

7. Discussion: Hypotheses and Research Questions

The first hypothesis in this project is that *H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways.* Through the questionnaire and the interview responses, it quickly became clear that there was little consensus on how public opinion could be defined; what respondents currently considered good measures of public opinion; what had been well-used and often used expressions of public opinion when they were active in the policy community group between 1990 and 2004; and what measures respondents thought would be good for decision-makers.

When asked to define public opinion, respondents identified four areas of focus that were important for them: who or what is the public, what is opinion, what is the focus of public opinion, and how is it measured. All of these elements were vital to understanding how interview respondents situated themselves in the debate around public opinion. They also demonstrated how varied respondents in the different policy community groups were in their approaches to public opinion. These findings help to confirm the first hypothesis (H1). Because

understanding public opinion often involves an understanding of the measures used to assess it, the next four questions on the value and utility of various measures for different groups also speak to the first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis in this project is that *H2 In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups.* One of the most important findings – that goes to support the rationale for undertaking this project– is that public opinion polling conducted by government was considered generally a good measure for decision-makers by many groups, but it is not the most important or most used measure of public opinion for most policy community groups. Many groups – from elected officials to student union presidents – pointed to a variety of measures that were very important for them in their former positions in the policy community – in part because of the realities of releasing quantitative research. They pointed to the difference between the *impact* of releasing information – in terms of accountability, responsiveness, and to what releasing information meant in terms of limiting what would be asked – and the *value* of releasing the information – in terms of accountability and responsiveness, but also in terms of what it would add to the discussion and to the government in terms of useful information.

When asked what measures were generally important for decision-makers, six of the eight groups identified polling commissioned by the provincial government, media communications, and public consultations as being generally important expressions of public opinion. Ministerial assistants (n=2), elected officials (n=2), deputy ministers (n=4), media (n=3), public opinion researchers (n=2), and university presidents (n=3) all agreed unanimously that polling commissioned by the provincial government was generally important, followed by 90% (n=9) of student union presidents and 88% (n=7) of senior public servants. Even those who did not agree unanimously were very clear in their assessment of the importance of this kind of polling. When asked to rate the importance of various measures of public opinion for them in their previous work in the policy community, group members pointed first to the importance of public protests and demonstrations, communications from constituents, and polling made public by the media before moving to polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of importance, it seems likely that the measures that the groups considered to be important were likely to be indicators of a shift in agenda – often requiring response from government. In particular, the first two - public protests and demonstrations and communications from constituents – can be considered active forms of public opinion expression, which may be indicators that members of the public are particularly upset about something that may require government to take action.

When it came to importance placed on government-commissioned public opinion research, ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), media (100%, n=3), public opinion researchers (100%, n=2), and university presidents (100%, n=3) said that this type of public opinion research was important for them in their previous work – as one might predict, since these groups would have had some connection with what questions were asked, how they were asked, and how results were interpreted and presented.

As noted earlier, ministerial assistants (n=2) and deputy ministers (n=4) were the only two groups who agreed that they often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. Senior public servants (88%, n=7), media (67%, n=2), student union presidents (67%, n=6), elected officials (50%, n=1), university presidents (33%, n=1) were less likely to agree that they consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government somewhat or very often. This may be a reflection of how often polling was done that related to the post-secondary education policy area.

Determining how often various public opinion measures were consulted showed a great deal of variation among the policy community groups – the most variation of all of the questions assessing value and utility of these measures. Just over half of the groups agreed that they often consulted newspaper editorials, polling made public by the media, and public protests and demonstrations; while just two of the groups (ministerial assistants and deputy ministers) said that they had very or somewhat often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of the government polling, this may be a reflection of how often polling was done during the 1991 to 2004 time period, and whether or not the polling was specific to the post-secondary education area.

Finally, when respondents were asked to assess whether or not government polling would have more impact or less impact if it were not to be publicly released, it was clear that they were split. Just under one-half said yes (43%, n=17) while over half (53%, n=21) said that it did not matter in terms of impact. A small proportion (1%, n=2) said that it depended. Many respondents noted that there were other kinds of public opinion assessment techniques being used because of the need to release polling results. But among those who said that if polling were not publicly released it would still have the same value, the emphasis was on the value of polling overall – for decision-makers in particular, but for government and for the public as a whole.

Thus, overall, the evidence shows that polling – whether conducted by government, media, or political parties – remains an important part of the ability to assess public opinion for policy community groups. But the evidence also shows – confirming the first and the third hypotheses – that there is a great deal of variation among the policy community groups when it comes to determining what they used to use and what was consulted often.

8. Conclusions

While there was not unanimous agreement on any of the measures of public opinion when asked to assess which had been important in respondents' previous work, there were some measures that drew greater agreement than others. In particular, seven of the eight groups from the policy community pointed to public protests and demonstrations and communications from constituents as being important in their previous work, followed closely by polling made public/commissioned by the media (six groups) and polling commissioned by the government (five groups). In terms of importance, it seems that the groups were responding to measures of opinion that were likely to be indicators of a shift in agenda.

Overall, there was a great deal of variation among the policy community groups in terms of how often they consulted various measures of public opinion – the most variation of all of the questions assessing value and utility of these measures. Just over half of the groups agreed that they often consulted newspaper editorials, polling made public by the media, and public protests and demonstrations; while just two of the groups (ministerial assistants and deputy ministers) said that they had very or somewhat often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of the government polling, this may be a reflection of how often polling was done during the 1991 to 2004 time period, and whether or not the polling was specific to the post-secondary education area. It may also reflect policy actors' concerns about public opinion polling, as reflected in the literature. However, it may be that there were simply other ways of assessing public opinion than polling - and that these would be more frequently available to all actors.

These results confirm that there is a great deal of variation among policy community members when it comes to what measures of public opinion that they value and use, and how valuable they consider government-commissioned, publicly-released polling results to be. Overall, these results suggest that we need to think more broadly about the opinions that influence policy making (from agenda-setting to evaluation), and develop additional ways of drawing out these opinions when attempting to understand why policies are the way they are.

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