



WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO ANSWER A FEW QUESTIONS?

By Amanda Cronkhite and Ron Granieri September 15, 2020
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Listeners of a certain age may recognize a tagline from a popular advertisement: four out of five dentists surveyed recommend sugarless gum for their patients who chew gum. The ad has it all. An appeal to authority and the power of a big number all designed to make the decision to chew a particular brand of gum sound appealing, if not healthy. It must have worked since ads using the line ran for years. Closer examination, however, reveals how many hedges are included in the statement and all the questions that it begs. Note for example, that the sentence doesn't say whether the dentists generally recommend that their patients chew gum at all, nor does it give any indication why that fifth dentist was so obdurate. It also assumes that dentists have special moral authority on questions of gum chewing which may overstate the public's willingness to exceed to the wishes of such general objects of fear and loathing. In any case, the use and abuse of both opinion polling and expert opinion shapes so much of the media landscape and our understanding of current public policy. As we face ongoing debates about coronavirus response and an impending presidential election, opinion leaders and the public are each wrestling with the interlocking questions of what do we know? How do we know what we know? And what the public thinks about the people who know things? What role should opinion polls play in public life? How can we be sure that we use them properly? What if expert opinion differs from that of the general public? Who referees that disagreement and on what basis? Our guest today to help us wrestle with such questions is Dr. Amanda Cronkhite, former foreign service officer and current post-doctoral fellow in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Illinois and her research and teaching has covered media bias, polling, the role of experts and public opinion. Welcome to A Better Peace, Dr. Amanda Cronkhite.

Amanda Cronkhite: Thank you, Ron. Good afternoon.

RG: So, what is the purpose of public opinion polling? To help people understand what they should know or to tell them what people in general know?

AC: Well, that kind of depends on the intention of the person who's doing the polling. The origins of public opinion polling go back to the 1930s, but it really picked up right around World War II. And it came into vogue as it became more apparent that what were called “man on the street poles” weren't working. The most famous “man on the street” poll that failed, probably being that Dewey beats Truman, which made of course into one of the most famous photos in American presidential history. And the idea that the opinions and ideas in cities might not reflect those in other parts of the country. And luckily, if you can get a representative sample of about 1,200 people, you can very well approximate the actual opinion of the so-called masses, but a lot of it comes down to how you ask the question, who exactly you poll. There're all kinds of biases that can be introduced into public opinion polling. For example, a leading question versus a properly written question. There are certain best practices. For example, always getting an odd number of selections so that someone isn't forced to choose between two if they're really neutral. So, a lot of what you see is a reflection of who's authoring the poll.

RG: Which of course means that there are more or less... well take a step back... This gets us already to the very vexed question of objectivity, right? So, when the question is if I'm asking questions because I have a vested interest in one answer rather than another, that might shape the way I ask the questions. How do respectable pollsters, if respectable is the right word, how do they try to make sure that the questions will get them the cleanest data?

AC: So, a lot can be done with question wording. Let's say we limit it to academic pollsters. The last thing you want to do is introduce error you can't measure. So, there is some error we can measure, social desirability bias, for example. No one says their racist anymore. So, what the Obama campaign did was they started asking people about how racist they thought their neighbors were because it looked like that proxy very well for underlying racist sentiment or latent racism. And that way you're getting a cleaner measure because there are still some people who will admit to being racist and sexist, but they're definitely the minority. If you want to ask about income, we usually do that with just ordinal variables, so X to Y, Y to Z. People are usually willing to answer in a range better than they're willing to say a number for their income. There's a lot of data and research going back well over 50 years about this. In terms of what the best practices are, if you've ever taken one of those on line personality tests, one way to triangulate it to see if you're getting good data is to ask the same question three different ways, and if the person answers the same on all those answers, then you actually have a really good measure of whatever you're getting at. So, this is currently all in vogue for businesses looking to hire people, having them do 300 question personality tests as they try to get at underlying personality traits.

RG: It does come back to, just as you want to have a big sample size of people that you're asking, it's also good to have a big sample size of questions that you are asking as well. Is that fair to say?

AC: Yeah, I mean that's ideal, but the reality is for every question you add to a survey, you lessen the likelihood that people will finish it. Obviously, if you're applying for a job, you're very likely to finish the 300 question personality test that the company wants you to take.

RG: Sure.

AC: If you're answering a survey, for example, the American National Election Survey, there's a lot of haggling over what questions get in and what get dropped because we know that if we go beyond a certain length, people will just stop answering. There's also question order effects. You have to be careful if you mention X before Y because you could prime someone to think about Y when you mention X. In the larger surveys, question wording is sometimes mixed up. For example, you have A, B, and C – version A, version B, version C – so you can see if there's priming affects from an earlier question on a later question. All of these assume you have a decent amount of resources which a lot of academic pollsters don't.

RG: Right.

AC: And for media polling, what you want often, for example, you mentioned the election in the intro. If you're trying to figure out who's up, there you want it fast, so it doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be good enough to have a reasonable margin of error. There are some polls that people like me consider more credible than others because they have more consistent or smaller margins of error. If you're looking at something, for example, that has a margin of error of plus or minus five, that means that someone who's reported to have an approval of 30 could have 35 could have 25. So, any difference within that margin of error is statistically insignificant. It means they could be completely tied or the person who looks like their below could be ahead. Large margins of error are one of the biggest dangers. So, people who are authoring polls that are really going to be used for rigorous data analysis want to have a margin of error as small as they can.

RG: Right, well, and what kinds of things go into reducing the margin of error of a poll?

AC: One of the easiest ways is to poll more people. That said, usually once you get over about 1,200, depending, that's usually representative enough for a country or for any region.

RG: Really?

AC: Yeah, approximating, again assuming. Because when polls first started being done, they realized less than 1,000 wasn't usually enough, but then there wasn't a ton of difference when you started going up to 2,000 or 2,500. Now, that assumes everyone answers all the questions. If you have a longer poll or if you have an ongoing panel poll, you might have more people. If you're trying to find out about subpopulations though, 1,200 people won't get you enough power. You're going to have to over sample those subpopulations if you want to extrapolate or draw inferences about them. So, if you go larger, the larger number of people you have, the more likely you are to have enough to really look at the cross tabs, which you always hear pundits on TV talking about the crosstabs. Well, the crosstabs from a 1,200 person nationally representative poll don't tell you much. The crosstabs from a well-designed poll where you're actually trying to get representative subpopulations can be really useful.

RG: But then we always run into the problem is when you talk about, say, the election of 2016, there can be a national poll that has a certain result but since the presidential election is not determined by a single national poll but by 50 different state polls, we run into all these different problems of does the fact that a poll, let's say in 2016, the fact that polls showed Hillary Clinton beating Donald Trump nationally, does the fact that she famously did not beat Donald Trump for the presidency, does that mean that the polls were wrong? Or does that mean that we need to think about how we understand the meaning of such polls going into an election?

AC: Well, the polls, and for national voting were actually correct to within half a percent, if we elected people by popular vote.

RG: Right.

AC: So, they were very good. The polling in 2016 was very accurate for predicting the popular vote. It was not accurate for predicting how we elect a president though because popular vote isn't how we do it. The other thing in 2016 is most polls, particularly election polls, are designed to include likely voters. You don't want to include the whole population because kids can't vote. You don't want to include just registered voters if you know that some people never come out. So, who is a likely voter? In 2016 there were two groups who were not factored into most of the polling because, well, two different things: one, voters, particularly African Americans who voted for Obama twice, were expected to be likely voters, and they didn't turn out. So, the turn out numbers for that group ended up being lower than expected. Secondly, largely high school educated white men who had never voted—men in their 40s who had never voted—turned out in record numbers and there's no reason a model would include them as a likely voter if they had never voted. So, the polling was accurate on the popular vote, but the polling reflected the expectation: these people have voted before they will vote again, these people have never voted, they probably won't vote. And 2016 was a bit upside down in who actually turned out to vote. The 2018 polls that factored more of this in were more accurate and the polling being done now for 2020 is trying to account better for certain known discrepancies. So, we know that people

who are more educated tend to answer polls more. We know that people who are older answer polls more because they have more time. We know that if you're running an online poll that tends to skew younger. Usually this can be fixed with weighting different segments. So, the 2020 polls are trying to more accurately think about who is a likely voter in this climate as opposed to who is a likely voter just generally.

RG: Interesting, because that's the problem, right? Is that polls can be accurate perhaps on the day that the poll is taken, but they don't perfectly predict, and we have to adjust them and think about the ways that they can suggest what we can expect, but there are going to be limits.

AC: Well some of this, again, goes back to question wording. If you were trying to predict the popular vote, you did it very well, but if you're trying to predict who's elected president, the opinion of the nation isn't what you need to figure out. It's really more of the opinion of what, 10 states? Maybe 10-12 states at the most? And if you think about even running good polling in those 10 or 12 states would cost you 10 to 12 times as much as it would to run a national poll if not more because the states that have really good infrastructure polling aren't necessarily the swing states.

RG: Right, well I want to move on to a couple other things but I have to ask this question first because I'm curious, do you think that an election that we're going to have in the fall that is likely to have a larger number of people voting by mail, voting perhaps early before Election Day, will that make it harder or easier to predict the result?

AC: So, as a general rule, anything that states do to make voting easier tends to increase turn out.

RG: Okay.

AC: The introduction of early voting has been one of the best innovations to help communities who find it more difficult to vote, to help them vote. You and I, if I need to leave my office at 10:00am to go vote, I can do that. Someone working an hourly job does not have that same flexibility. Someone who can't find childcare doesn't have that same flexibility. Someone in a sandwich generation taking care of kids and parents might not be able to get away on a Tuesday between 6:00am and 7:00pm to vote. But if you would give them time over the two weeks before that, they can probably find some time to vote. People who have trouble accessing transportation, nursing homes, churches have been able to arrange things like buses to get people to their polling places. Even Uber and Lyft started offering free rides for voting, partly because it's good publicity, partly because not having access to childcare transportation, not having a flexible job are some of the things that we know over the past decades have stopped very predictable populations from being able to vote on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. So, the introduction of early voting then worked really well. If the expansion of "no cause mail-in

voting,” I have no reason to believe people would be less likely to vote. Well, very few states have “no cause mail-in voting,” but it looks like more of them will go that way.

RG: Right. Well, so let me shift now because it's one thing to talk about polling when we connect polling directly to elections but I'm also thinking about the relationship of polling to making public policy which gets into two angles that I wanted to suggest in the opening comments. One is the degree to which public opinion can or should shape policy decisions and also the relationship between public polling and the role of experts if you want to use a dirty word these days, experts in making decisions. In other words, if we ask the public, do they want to wear masks in public? We can get one answer. If we ask experts whether wearing masks in public is a good idea, we may get a different answer, and I'm curious how you see those two aspects of getting at the making of public policy fitting together. Should we be asking the public how they feel about policy decisions in order to make the decisions? Or do we just make the decisions and ask the people how they feel about them afterwards?

AC: So, a lot of this, I would say, gets to how you think about democratic theory. So, in an ideal world, if my government is working well and everyone is doing their job and no one is stealing anything and I think my representative is looking out for my interests and paying attention to what the community needs, I shouldn't have to pay attention to politics, right? Ideally, if everything is working, I shouldn't have to think about that. I should trust my representative to do what his or her constituency wants.

RG: Right.

AC: Obviously such an ideal world never exists. You bring in the media. Okay. So, I pay for a newspaper subscription not because I read it every day, but because I want there to be a statehouse reporter who is making sure that my representative is showing up and writing an article: representative so-and-so hasn't been here in 10 days, because I want someone on the public health beat following what's going on with COVID. So, even in a less than ideal situation, hopefully we have a media that has the resources and the time to be doing that kind of check on malfeasance, the fourth estate role that I think a lot of us hope the media does. That's the value added of most media, right? It's not the everyday stuff. The real value added for media is things like consumer protection reports, investigative reporting and statehouse reporters really don't get the credit they deserve for keeping an eye on what state governments and local governments are doing because those laws, those state and local laws, you feel much more than the big national laws.

RG: Right.

AC: So, in terms of policy, if everything is working well, I shouldn't have to think or be polled about what's going on with policy. That said, opinion polling is a reality, and one thing that we know is if you ask people a question, the way the brain works, they're not going to answer it with the full body of their knowledge. As a general rule, people answer what comes off the top of their head. So, unless someone thinks about something frequently or has thought about it recently, it's not going to be at the top of their head. That's just not how the brain works. So, we see these frequency and recency effects sometimes in polling. Well again, another best practice is to give people the option to say I don't know, or I don't have an opinion. Now again, we do know there's some research that says women are more likely to say that than men, but as a best practice, if I were to ask you right now, what you think of Kentucky's tax law, you probably don't have a strong opinion. So, wouldn't it be nice if you could say, I don't want to answer that question.

RG: Right.

AC: It reduces my number of respondents if I'm writing the poll, but it probably gives me a more accurate answer.

RG: Right.

AC: Now back to political theory, who should be leading these things? That depends on if you're a small-d democrat, a small-r republican, a technocrat, an elitist, a populist, a Marxist. I mean, kind of who should be making the decisions. The proletariat or the patricians is one of the great ongoing debates in political theory.

RG: Sure, well and I guess because that gets to the question of expertise in a democracy, right? There is a line that circulates on the internet that's attributed to Isaac Asimov. I don't know if he actually said it, but that he says that one of the dangers in a Democratic society is if people think that they go from the idea that I'm a legal equal to you in a democracy to also believing that my ignorance is equal to your expertise. So, that equality of citizens means that you're not allowed to tell me what to do. Even if I want to drink bleach, you're not supposed to tell me not to drink bleach. And this gets to that idea is what should the role of expert technocratic opinion be in a democracy or in a republic? Just so that we can avoid one particular debate that's likely to happen in the comments on this program. But in a Democratic Republic, like the one in which we live, what should be the relationship between technocratic experts and the will of the people or just to make it even more complicated, a three-way thing: you've got technocratic experts, you've got the will of the people, and you've got the will of the people's representatives who claim to know what the people want. How should we figure out how to balance those things? How do we referee those when there is a disagreement there? How do we referee those disagreements?

AC: Daniel Patrick Moynihan. I grew up in New York State. Everyone is entitled to his own opinions, that his own facts. Unfortunately, we live in an age where the phrase alternative facts exists, and some people actually think it's true. Now, in a lot of languages other than English, the word truth doesn't take a definite article. It takes an indefinite article. In Spanish, for example, it's my truth or your truth. So, the idea that there can be different understandings of things I think is fine. One thing that has changed in the past 20 to 40 years is that as the media system in the United States has become more fragmented, we don't have the same shared basic understanding of baseline facts that we used to have from newspapers and broadcast television. And without that same shared understanding, then it's very hard to believe anyone who's saying anything discordant to what you already believe, be it an expert or Joe Shmo. So, who should have the control? I think expertise is a good thing. I don't want a citizen cardiologist. I don't want a citizen mechanic working on my car. I don't want a citizen accountant doing my taxes and deciding that, yeah, we'll consider that deductible. I think there's certain arenas in which all of us really know that expertise matters, but we forget that in our everyday lives. So, in terms of writing laws, yes, there are permanent staff on the Hill because it helps to know how to write a law and it helps to not write a law that undoes another law unless your intention is to undo that law. So, institutional knowledge, I think is incredibly important. Industrialized democracies are entering their latest wave of populism. Latin America, for example, is coming out of it. And so, as the industrialized democracies in the past five years have entered their latest populist wave, we do tend to see this denigration of expertise that comes along with populism. This is not just in the past few years. Populist sentiment in the U.S. has been increasing for at least 20 years, so it's not unexpected that there would be a reaction, for example, that all news is fake news and that no experts have any value, but it does mean that we're probably going to have some laws written in the next few years that unintentionally undo other laws, or that aren't written in a way that they're good laws.

RG: I don't know if this is hopeful or if this is what we should be worried about, but the idea is there can be these moments of disagreement. There can be these tensions between expert opinion and broad public opinion or even a politicization of opinion, but as long as nobody's making any decisions that are going to have permanent catastrophic results, there's always the possibility to recalibrate in the future. One of the problems in our temporary situation is we seem to be facing some pretty significant challenges that could lead to catastrophic decisions, and I wonder, is this a sign of the times, that the stakes are higher even as it's harder to reach a broad consensus. Or maybe, I'm a historian, you've studied the history of media, maybe we give ourselves too much credit that we think that things are worse now than they were in the past, when maybe they've always been this terrible and people survived all those previous times, I don't know.

AC: In terms of the treatment of media or the treatment of experts?

RG: Well, in terms of the treatment of experts, in terms of the depth of disagreement or the size of the gap between what experts might suggest and what is politically more likely to happen.

AC: Well, I think the difference now is that we've democratized technology. We've democratized the access to technology so much that people are hearing about things that even 20 years ago they wouldn't have heard about. So, let's take the White House press briefing. There is absolutely no history of carrying them live. They're really boring, generally. I'm not talking long history. I'm talking George W. Bush and Obama and Clinton that that was a time for the press to get clarification from the Press Secretary, and if there was going to be a big announcement, there would be a heads up that hey, you might want to carry this, or if somebody important was coming in the room there'd be a heads up, but there was certainly no expectation that everyday networks would carry the White House press briefing.

RG: Right.

AC: And for some reason in the past few years there is. Now some of that is the 24-hour news networks means they have a 24-hour news hole to constantly fill. But the other thing is, there's kind of this change in expectation. Now you see people who wouldn't have heard about topics even a few years ago who are hearing about them because someone blubs something up in a speech or in some interview that again, 5-10 years ago, you would have just stopped and you would have said okay wait, I said that wrong, let me re-say it, no big deal. And that's not our current media system. The 2020 media system is very, to use a very technical term my dissertation advisor used to use, the modern news is very twitchy and very reactive that way. So, you and I wouldn't have known what was on the president's agenda even ten years ago unless it was something huge, right? And now you have people tweeting out every day what the agenda is. So, I think that what's happened is that people have access to data points without context and that is making it much harder for us to have a facts or evidence-based discussion.

RG: So, and that then makes the responsibility for each individual citizen that much greater right? Because you have access to this information and the gatekeepers are weaker and so we have to figure out what we think and we would like to think that we are all making those decisions in a kind of good faith, even though we can't be sure what is motivating our citizens, which, to get us back to a final question to take us home, you mentioned that in the past or certainly during the Obama administration, there was this idea, you can't ask people if they have particular opinions, but you can ask them what they think the opinions of their neighbors are, which can be something of a window or a mirror. Thinking into the future, how should responsible citizens in a democracy like the United States, how should they imagine their responsibility to "get it right" to understand what's going on and to make the right kinds of decisions? And how much should they expect their neighbors to be doing their best to

understand? Or should they just simply assume that everybody is going to get things wrong so people should just do what feels good for them in the moment?

AC: Well, first and foremost, we tend to self-segregate into either like-minded or like-looking communities, so the odds of actually hearing discordant information in your circle of friends or in your church group are very low. You're much more likely, as anyone is much more likely to hear discordant information through the media or at work than you are from the people you regularly associate with. But let's take the Obama example and what they were trying to measure. They were trying to measure latent racism. Well, there are a lot of people who don't think latent racism is a thing, and who certainly don't think experts can measure it. But technocrats or other experts think, no, we need to measure latent racism, we need to measure latent sexism because we can't fight structural inequality without it. So how do you have a conversation about latent racism or latent sexism if you have whole groups who say that's not possibly a thing, and another group saying it's critical to our understanding. And nobody wants an expert to tell you, okay, so here's this measure and I see latent sexism. Now again, if we go back to what these behavioral surveys are trying to get to that the employers want is they're measuring that. They're measuring latent racism. They're measuring latent sexism. They're measuring how much of a team player you are. All these 300 question polls that job seekers are filling out are trying to measure all the things we don't want to think about or talk about in ourselves. So, how we get people to admit uncomfortable truths about themselves because experts say, look here's this data, in the aggregate we see this. I don't know. I've taken enough of those behavioral tests to know that I choose not to look at the details of the responses. I've written enough surveys to know that how you ask a question matters, and if you know it. So, if I'm fielding a multi-country survey, I might be able to include one or two questions at the most on how much news someone watches or where they get their news. I'm not going to be able to ask if they paid attention. I'm not going to be able to ask if they really care about news. If I'm trying to field a multi-country survey, I'm going to have a very set amount of time that I can work with in terms of likelihood of someone answering all my questions. And so, I take what I can get, and I know that as someone who does comparative cross-cultural research. But in terms of how we get people to understand that hey, this data says this, and this is why we as a society should interrogate all the uncomfortable things we don't think about or like to think about in a society, I don't think many people have good advice on how to do that.

RG: I guess the most we can hope for is that we'll just keep asking the questions no matter what the answers are.

AC: As a general rule, as long as society keeps trying to do better, we screw up sometimes, but we tend to keep moving forward.

RG: Okay, well I'll take that. That's a reasonably hopeful, reasonably helpful point on which the end this conversation. Thank you, Dr. Amanda Cronkhite, for joining us today to discuss all these questions on A Better Peace.

AC: Thank you for having me.

RG: You bet. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us suggestions for future programs. Please also subscribe to A Better Peace if you haven't subscribed already. You certainly should want to after a conversation like this one, and if you do subscribe or when you do subscribe, please rate and review this podcast on the pod-catcher of your choice because that's how other people can find discussions like this. And so, we hope to see all of you again on future conversations. But until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.