
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

NYT/CBS survey sticks with worst poll question in history

Press Criticism | By Craig Guirann | Politics

Jan. 25, 2012 — Well, maybe it's not the worst question in history, but it's really bad. I'm talking about Question 60 in the [Jan. 12–17 New York Times / CBS News poll](#), which asks the following:

Which do you think is better for the country? Should the Democrats and Republicans compromise some of their positions in order to get things done, or stick to their positions even if it means not getting as much done?

The question simultaneously encompasses too much and too little. Perhaps the only prudent response would have been, “What kind of compromises, how important the positions, and what is ‘some of their positions’ supposed to mean?”

Let's translate. “Should officials in the two parties act like adults in order to get the country's business accomplished, or should they insist on all their silly ‘positions’ — like kindergarteners throwing tantrums — as we watch effective governance grind to a halt?”

here's not much drama when a question is framed like that: 85 percent of respondents took the “act like adults” position, precisely the same percentage as when the survey asked the question last August and September.

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In a specific case, of course, the stakes involved in compromising a position — either for the position holder or for the country — may be relatively small. If the sticking point between Republicans and Democrats were a small gap in proposed expenditure levels for demonstration projects promoting the use of green energy sources, compromise might well be in order. But that is very different from the circumstance where Republicans reject the science of global warming and double down on a policy pushing only dirty and non-sustainable fuels.

There are a host of issues — Social Security is one crucial example — where there are real philosophical differences between those who would privatize (either at once or, more insidiously, in seemingly easier-to-digest stages), and those who would maintain a robust system by curtailing the current exemption from payroll taxes for Americans with higher incomes.

“Which do you think is better for the country,” another poll might ask, “Should Democrats go halfway down the road of destroying programs like Social Security in order to secure Republican agreement to a budget?” Or perhaps: “Should Republicans ignore their philosophical opposition to what they consider unwise and unsustainable federal expenditures and continue to fund Social Security without change?”

Maybe the question is, “When a Senator’s political opponents are holding the country’s creditworthiness hostage, does it make sense for that Senator to compromise with the hostage takers, or does doing so set a dangerous precedent.” (See last summer’s fight over the debt limit.)

I don’t imagine that any of those questions would clock in with 85 percent of respondents saying “yes to compromise.”

Deeply embedded in the NYT/CBS question is an assumption about how things work: you need to compromise to get things done. Again, it depends — in this case, on the issue, on the relative backbone of the antagonists, and on the time frame in which something is expected to get done. As to the last, one very good way of ending gridlock is for Americans to choose between conflicting visions of what kind of society we should be and how we should get there. Enabling voters to do that doesn’t involve turning everyone into a Republican of convenience, but rather identifying policy choices. “What do you think contributes to the ability of elections to provide meaningful choice? Having candidates who are strong supporters of their respective causes — what the dictionary defines as ‘partisans’ — or candidates who voice views that are largely indistinguishable from one another?”

The question that the NYT/CBS poll actually asked both reflects and contributes to the maddeningly dominant narrative that celebrates every “bipartisan solution” as “courageous” as soon as two of the most conservative Democrats in Congress sign on to a proposal that is anathema to anyone even vaguely left of center.

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It’s the same thing that happens with Question 53. If you start from the belief that what is needed are “tough choices” to reduce the budget deficit and still maintain “needed federal programs,” it seems entirely natural to pose a question like:

When it comes to dealing with the tough choices involved both in cutting programs to reduce the budget deficit and still maintaining needed federal programs, whose approach do you prefer — the Republicans in Congress or Barack Obama’s?

It's a narrative loved by President Obama (who bests the GOP by 9 percent on this question), and by Bowles-Simpson types, and by reporters who identify a "balanced" approach with what will appeal to

"independent" voters. It leaves out altogether the possibility that the "tough choices" are to resist demagoguery and insist that what is currently needed is not deficit reduction but more stimulus, just as it leaves out the possibility (as Republicans would have it) that what constitutes a "needed federal problem" must be redefined.

TEA PARTY MOVEMENT OR SOCIALISM: WHICH IS LOOKED ON MORE FAVORABLY?

According to Question 86 of the survey, 33 percent of respondents have a favorable view of socialism, 10 percent more than have, according to Question 92, a favorable view of the "Tea Party movement."

This was among the questions not mentioned in the article accompanying the survey, and one that I think hasn't gotten a lot of attention more broadly.

You will recall that the press concluded that it was profoundly newsworthy when the Tea Party movement was up, and oceans of ink were spilled; given the last 60 years of red-baiting, I guess I shouldn't be waiting for articles that explore the existence and meaning of the "favorable to socialism faction."

As it happens, the NYT/CBS poll is highly respected for the professional manner in which it is conducted, a judgment with which I agree. But content matters, and questions don't just fall from the sky. Sometimes — as with the recent uptick in polling on questions of wealth and income inequality — questions can make manifest the broad public disaffection for policies that exacerbate inequality, and can fuel further public discussion.

For election years and for the years of governance in between, the question of whether and when a party should stand for something is surely not trivial. The poll needed to do a better job on enabling citizens to express their views on that question.

This content originally appeared at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/article/nytcbs-survey-sticks-worst-poll-question-history>