

RETHINKING CONSUMERISM AS NATIONAL PURPOSE
Tom Bowerman – December 22, 2008

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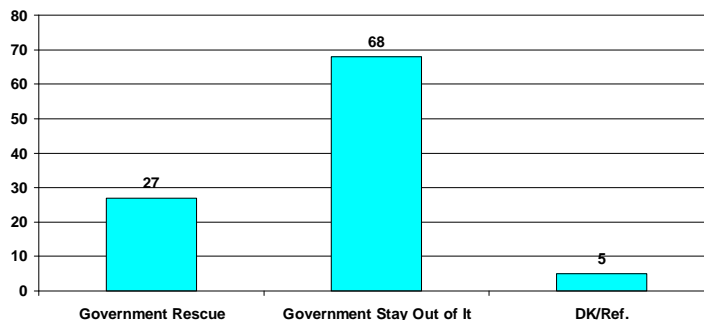
*Public sentiment is everything.
With public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed.
-- Abraham Lincoln*

“As goes General Motors, so goes the Nation”, coined in 1952 by the chairman of GM, is now taking on new meaning. General Motors, historic icon of America’s financial, design and production prowess, now faces taxpayer bailout or bankruptcy. A rescue means even more national debt or printing more money (defacto taxation). In short, rescue means following the very path which got us into the mess in the first place – borrowing and leveraging. Einstein said “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”.

Opinion polls in the country show that the general public is not enthusiastic toward economic bail-out programs, whether for the finance, credit, automotive or other economic sectors. The work of an Oregon research project is uncovering some interesting findings along these lines. PolicyInteractive (PI) began research a year ago to explore the curious disconnect between policy makers and the general public on some key public issues. As a group of researchers, PI also wanted to examine partisanship and polarization which has driven a wedge through our society. Using social scientific methodology, PI is conducting a series of statistically representative opinion surveys, each one iteratively informing the next in exploration of Oregon values and politics. We now find ourselves prepared to offer some mid-project insights relevant to current events.

From an Oregon-wide random sample survey, the project has found lack of support for bailout of the financial industry.

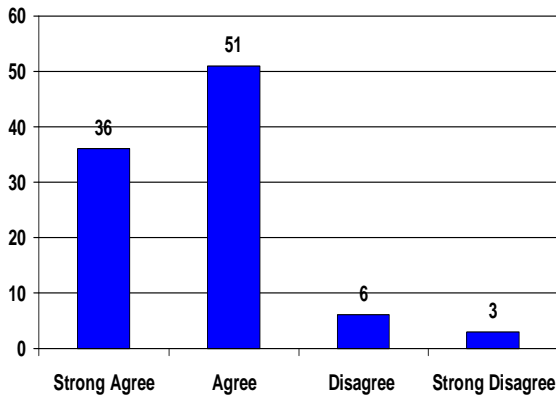
Regarding the recent federal intervention in the credit markets, which of these two statements do you agree with more: [Rotate]
a. I believe governmental rescue of the banking and credit industry is necessary. –OR–
b. I believe investment risk and reward should be borne by risk-takers, not tax payers. GP2b Split B N = 200



A more unexpected finding was that the general public feels strongly that “our country would be a better place if we all consumed less”, indicating agreement of 87% of Oregonians in March, 2008, then replicated at 74% in a just completed November survey. We re-polled this question to see if it held up amid 8 months of deepening recession. We believe it is holding up, in light of the strengthening support of those who “strongly agree”.

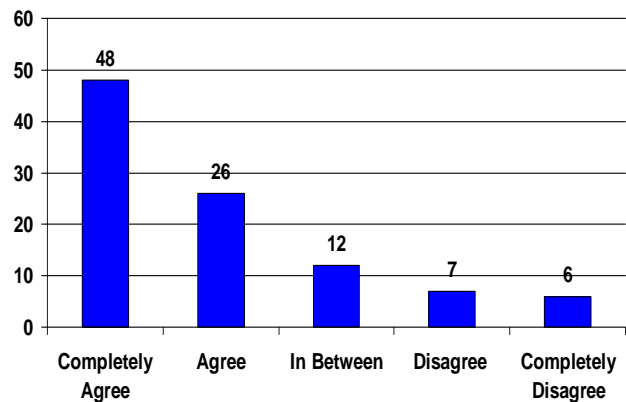
Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less.

March 2008 n=400



Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less.

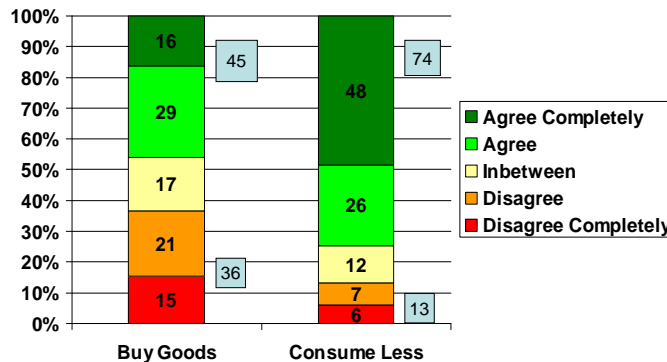
November 2008 n=400



Public opinion about the comparison the two somewhat competing beliefs; “Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less” and “We need to buy things for the good of the economy” yielded a real surprise. The importance of looking at complementary but somewhat oppositional statements allows us to weigh the relativity of competing social values.

Compare: ‘Buy Goods for Good of The Economy’ - ‘Country Better Off If We Consume Less’

November 2008 (Compare V1A & V1C)



[Full question text, rotates in total of eight balanced questions: “We need to buy things for the good of the economy”; “Our country would be a better place if we all consumed less”]

While a number of citizens seem able to straddle the two views simultaneously, the “consume less” clearly is the heavy weight over the goodness of buying things.

PI also conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with a subset of citizens who identified themselves as conservatives drawn from one of our random sample statewide surveys. We asked them what “consume less” means to them, how our country would be “better” if we all consumed less, and what kinds of values they think need to be reordered in an economic downturn, among other items.

One of our most interesting findings from the interviews is how similar we are, irrespective of ideological identities. We are close to one mind when it comes to cutting unnecessary purchases, reducing dependency on foreign oil, focusing on more meaningful human and conservation values, and reducing the central role consumption currently plays in our lives. While these findings might not seem unusual in retrospect, it does appear to challenge some conventional stereotypes about hedonism and materialistic appetites.

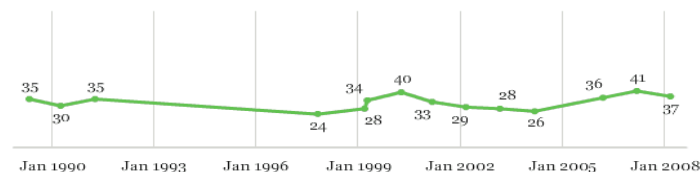
A related cultural issue is greenhouse gas pollution and global warming. A worldwide consensus of first-rate scientists have said for a decade that human-caused greenhouse gases must be cut by at least seventy-five percent. Yet effective cultural response to this challenge has been virtually non-existent. One reason is that many of us continue to be unmoved about global warming – for diverse reasons beyond the scope of this discussion. Without majority support for climate solutions, it’s far more difficult for leaders to enact meaningful greenhouse gas reduction policy.

Do you worry a great deal about global warming? Gallup Tracking 18 years

I'm going to read you a list of environmental problems. As I read each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all. How much do you personally worry about ...

The "greenhouse effect" or global warming

■ % Great deal



GALLUP POLL

Since the 1970’s, Oregon has been a leader in many environmental matters, but curiously, PI’s findings show Oregonians have less concern about climate warming than the nation as a whole. Climate solutions can be stymied by ambiguous public concern. While certain segments of the population are very prepared to support climate policy, other significant segments don’t see the problem. Without some breakthrough, effective policy is difficult. This is where the findings about public opinion on “consumption” become meaningful.

The link between general consumption and greenhouse emissions is undeniable. It can be expressed in something like an equation: $P \times C = E$ (Population x Consumption = Emissions). Insert quantifiable numbers into the equation yields relative impacts from relevant populations. Our national greenhouse emissions exceed industrialized European by 2-3 times and China by 10 times on a per capita basis. Yet, facts and credible scientific predictions leave the public unmoved. The people who support meaningful actions remain well below fifty percent.

PI's consumption findings are most interesting because they come from all ideological sectors, as would be expected with 87% popular agreement. For example, we found strong agreement for less consumption among people who view environmentalists with distain and who view climate change as a non-problem. In other words, while a majority may not agree that climate change is a significant problem, the issue of consumption provides a "big tent" under which we may find enough common ground for effective public policies. Framing climate change as *a symptom* rather than *the problem* may help us find the democratic majorities required for effective public policies – policies that address over-consumption directly and global warming indirectly, but effectively. Different reasons, same result!

This leads us back to the "what's good for GM is good for the nation". The adage once referred to material goodness flowing from industrial output. For the majority of people it is now reversed – the adage now refers to a nation that has lost its bearings in moral and spiritual affairs. Why bail out companies who have made exceptionally bad business decisions by failing to respond to our collective needs? General Motors is a metaphor for the economic "crisis" and what kind of economy we choose. Economy is meant in the broadest sense of the term.

The public appears to understand that the economic downturn opens up opportunities to reinforce (or re-learn) important lessons about risk and responsibility. Do our elected officials understand the opportunity which exists, to redirect our common purpose for the greater good? New economic and job opportunities can now emerge, just as tire manufacturers once replaced buggy whip makers. We can make needed progress on reforming our community ties and living within our means. But our leaders appear dangerously inclined to rescue the old order and save those institutions which are most at fault for putting us in this most precarious situation – by promoting and capitalizing on hollow desires and short term profits.

We are at an historic fork in the road. Our collective choice hangs in the balance. Will we take the path that renews our sense of shared purpose in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? We hope that sharing these discoveries of changing public perceptions will give leadership new insights restoring our sense of common purpose.

Tom Bowerman is Project Director for PolicyInteractive, a Eugene based research organization within the Institute for Sustainability Education and Ethics. He is a member of the American Association of Public Opinion Research. Ezra Markowitz, Stacy Vynne and Sam Porter, Ph.D. are staff contributors to the research.