

Public Discontent with Public Policy and Implications For Consumer Culture

Drawn from PolicyInteractive Survey 7 Oregon Opinions about the Economy, Environment and Politics

Briefing Report
February 12, 2011

Tom Bowerman,
PolicyInteractive

Primary Topics in this paper:

- I. Citizen Discontent – Be Prepared for the Unexpected
- II. Consumption Concern Persistence

Background: PolicyInteractive (PI) conducts Oregon based statistical sample surveys. We share results with policymakers, social scientists and the public. Our purpose is to explore for common cultural purpose laying below perceived ideological divides and political divisiveness. This report discusses two findings drawn from the data of PI's seventh opinion survey conducted between November 30 and December 10 statistically representative of Oregon citizens 18 years and older at 95% confidence. All PI surveys are controlled for gender and geographic representation. PI Survey 7 obtained peer review by researchers Steve Johnson of Northwest Survey and Data; Adam Davis of DHM Research; and Robert Ribe of the University of Oregon. This brief discusses two under-utilized topics of public disposition, but the issues discussed should not be taken in isolation of survey design and content. Therefore, for readers interested in context and methodology, unabridged top-lines (questions and results) are available on request and soon posted on our website. Prior surveys and papers and discussions about methodology are available on our website:

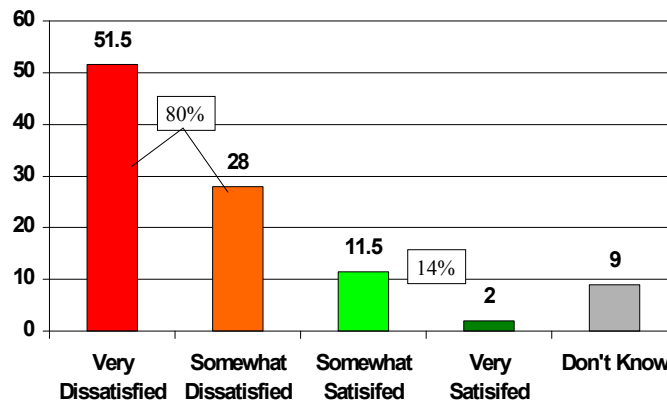
www.policyinteractive.org

I. CITIZEN DISCONTENT: Nationally, citizen discontent has been growing for decades, changing from eighty percent support for government policy to eighty percent discontent over sixty years of tracking (Pew Research Center). PI surveying finds Oregon similarity to national surveying on support for government. Is citizen discontent simply a sign of the times or does it portend something of importance? Current events in Tunisia and Egypt exhibit the potential of discontented citizenry. Improbable as such a comparison may seem, it is nonetheless even more predictable that change will occur within a functional but discontented democracy. National surveying and our recent December 2010 survey offers a barometric predictor of change.

In our December 2010 survey we began by asking four hundred randomly selected Oregonians two questions. First we asked their opinion of the way things are going in the country using a question construct identical to that of Gallup and Pew Research organizations. Second, we asked “In a few words, what is the single most important thing which contributes to your feeling of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) about the way things are going?” This sequence allows us to track Oregon opinion against well regarded national surveying results, and the open-ended “what...contributes to your feeling...” collected in their own words offers a much more textured explanation than commonly available in most opinion surveys.

All in all, are you dissatisfied or satisfied with the way things are going in this country today?

PI Dec 2010 N=400 Q1



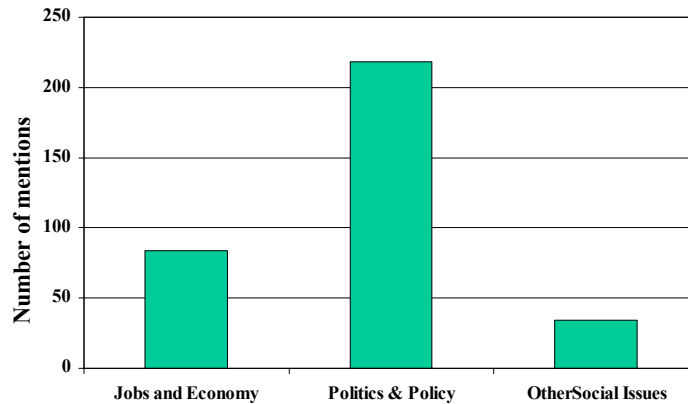
This is the highest level of dissatisfaction we have measured in our series of surveying to date and matches national surveying done by others. The eighty percent dissatisfaction being the predominant response, we list those respondents reasons categorized into key topic areas from transcriptions by trained interviewers following best standards of practice for the survey trade.

In a few words, what is the single most important thing which contributes to your dissatisfaction with the way things are going? PI 7 Q2B (open) n=318, 340 items mentioned

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • 85 Jobs | • 11 Government intrusion |
| • 77 Politics/Government | • 11 The Republicans |
| • 30 Deficit/Waste | • 9 The Democrats |
| • 17 Social Security | • 8 Drift to socialism |
| • 16 Unequal wealth | • 8 Illegal Immigrants |
| • 14 The wars | • 7 Education declines |
| • 13 Health care | • 4 Environmental decline |
| • 12 Obama/Congress | • 2 Quality of life decline |

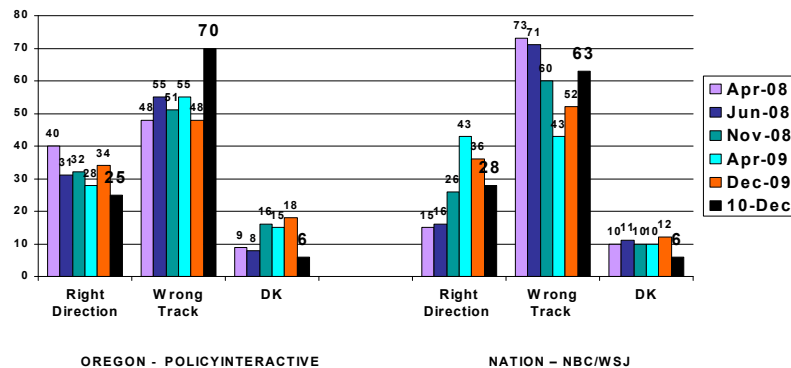
By clustering the responses to three categories, we see from respondents own volunteered responses that politics and policy is the greatest general concern of citizens. This disputes the conventional position of the media that the public is mostly concerned about “jobs and economy”.

Dissatisfaction distilled to 3 issues



The third question in the survey asked how respondents felt about the way things are going in Oregon. While dissatisfaction with Oregon direction was less intense than nationally, it is still higher than anything we have seen in PI’s project sequence involving six sample surveys going back three years.

Generally speaking, would you say that things in Oregon are headed in the right direction or would you say they’re on the wrong track? Comparisons PI, MOE 5%. NBC/WSJ n=1005 MOE 3.1%



A more detailed and explanative view of this emerges when the full survey contents are evaluated, available by request in text or graphic format in the unabridged contents of the survey.

The significance of citizen disaffection for the direction of things nationally and statewide is explained in contemporary social psychology research. It isn't just that we're dissatisfied, it's what happens cognitively when we're aggravated by events as we see them. Drawing on popular writings like Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink" and "The Tipping Point" and scholarly writings like Marcus, Neuman and Mackuen's "Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment", negative or high resonance emotional responses are more likely to bring reflexive change. This applies both to individual actions and to collective cultural movements. Policymakers and social change advocates might reasonably ask, "Should we look at this negatively or positively?" Naturally, this depends on one's perception of the status quo and/or the desirability of various potential futures.

II. OBSERVING CHANGES IN CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONSUMPTION CONCERN

Background: Human-caused climate change has been in public consciousness and policy arena for more than twenty years. Gallup and Pew Research have documented five years of declining public concern about climate change. Gallup finds a statistical decline of public concern about climate change over a twenty year period.

The PolicyInteractive Research project was designed to explore public perceptions and actions regarding human-induced climate change. In 2007 we began assembling global-warming opinion survey data (reaching back to 1987) and began our original Oregon survey research in early 2008.

From that work we reported that public concern about global warming was at best marginal for major policy actions. We found that concern for climate change in Oregon was lower than the nation as a whole. We also discovered and reported that public concern about material consumption was significantly higher than climate concern. We've previously reported that concern for climate change was about 30% very concerned and 30% somewhat concerned for a 60% total concern level. Same survey concern about our collective consumption tended to be near 50% very concerned up and to 88% total concern, a significant differential.

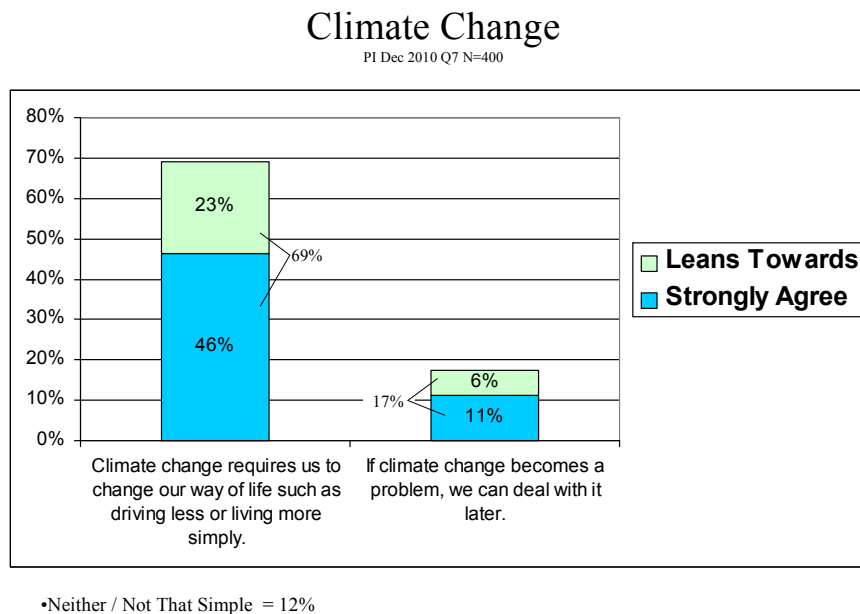
Of special interest was the finding that consumption concern transcended typical ideological divides which otherwise polarize our policy and political processes. These findings were replicated across five previously peer reviewed surveys which yielded a high confidence of validity.

Throughout, we have examined how the "consume less" attitude might assist climate change responsiveness.

If climate change has become contaminated by ideological arguing, we hypothesized that attitude toward consumption might be a more productive avenue for discourse and action. The notion of linguistic reframing may be evoked but we believe it is more about tapping ingrained culture-wide values toward over-consumption we see and feel, apparently not triggered by the yet intangible perception of human caused climate change.

Our interest was piqued because of the broadly accepted view that climate change is caused by our consumption behaviors. Oregonians responded affirmatively in an earlier survey by 5:1 that consumption is the cause of climate change.. American lifestyle is of special interest because we consume goods and materials at two to five times higher than any other industrialized country. Yet we have less than commensurate well-being as measured by widely accepted measures like life expectancy, literacy, infant mortality, health care, and self-reported well-being and happiness. PI's in-depth interviewing of randomly selected Oregon citizens (reported previously) reveal Oregonians view our culture's over-consumption is inflicting undesirable social and environmental impacts. Examination of national research on this topic reveals that Oregon attitudes are not unique in this regard.

Increase in Climate Concern: Previously we have reported public concern regarding climate change to be insufficient to drive social response behaviors. Now in this seventh survey in December 2010, we observe increased affirmative response to climate concern:



Based on our prior research results about views toward climate change or need to take action, these

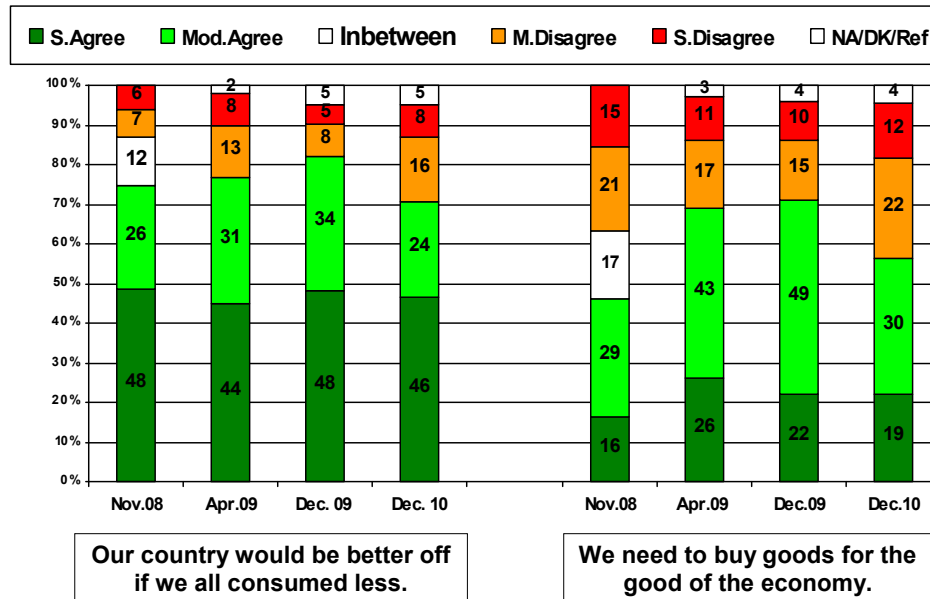
results represent an increase of ten to fifteen percentage points from prior surveying. Elsewhere, reputable national surveying by Pew (see <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/669.pdf>) and Gallup surveying, show ongoing decline in concern about climate change over the past four years. PI's current finding of increased climate concern is especially surprising due PI's previous reporting that Oregonians are even less concerned with the impacts of climate than the nation as a whole. Thus the current increase agreement to this Oregon climate change question suggests that *framing* the climate change topic in a 'consume less' context (e.g. "driving less or living more simply") increases Oregonian affirmation. This linguistic framing supposition needs to be tested more fully using split sampling methodology.

Three years of extended PolicyInteractive research into the topic of consumption compelled our team to postulate that consumption concern had more power to move public policy than climate concern. Our most current results show that consumption concern has moved down a bit while climate concern may be moving up in public consciousness, narrowing the gap as key movers of public concern. We are compelled to both report this observation outright and to temper the importance of this new observation for several reasons. First, the lower 'consume less' may be due a survey methodological explanation¹; second, the increase in climate concern may be motivated by the affirmative response to the "consume less" language construct.

Our baseline measure of consumption disposition has used an identical pairing of questions across four of our surveys. The two statements are designed to be balanced in tone and affirmation for "consume less" or "buy goods". We ask each respondent their level of support for "We need to buy goods for the good of the economy" and "Our country would be better off if we all consumed less". These pairs are always rotate in order in each survey and occupy altered locations in different surveys to negate question influences.

¹ The December 2010 survey used two forms split evenly between the total responses. Form A used the consume-less pair just after the opening questions about direction of the country while Form B consume-less items were put toward the end of the survey. Form A showed 38% strong agreement response while Form B showed 54% strong agreement response, suggesting question order influence difference between the two forms. We suspect that the strong negative disposition reported on the 'direction of the country and Oregon' questions negatively affected the closely following 'consume less' items.

I'll read some statements we sometimes hear people say about the current economic downturn. Please tell me: strongly disagree, moderately disagree, moderately agree or strongly agree with each statement: (compare PI Nov08/Apr09/Nov09/Dec10)



The December 2010 results for “consume less” support are the lowest we’ve seen across six surveys (two surveys are omitted here because they used different constructs) although we noted this decline may be in part to our recent survey design. However, the partner “buy goods” question was also the lowest we’ve previously reported (contributing to our methodology explanation in footnote 1). It is noteworthy that the level of “strong agreement” for “consume less” was almost two and a half times greater than “buy goods for the good of the economy”.

We have previously reported similar findings from a 2009 Center for American Progress (CAP) national sample survey showing very high national support for a “consume less” type question item. The CAP survey titled “Forty ideas which shape American politics” reported the highest item of agreement was “Americans should adopt a more sustainable lifestyle by conserving energy and consuming fewer goods.” On a four point scale, the survey showed - 47% strongly agreed, with a 80% combined agreement. The CAP sector analysis matched PI’s earlier findings including that this ‘consume less’ topic bridges standard party and ideological distinctions.

An Oregon-wide survey just completed (January 2011) by DHM Research of Portland included our often-used paired rotating questions about “consume less” and “buy goods”. The results of this survey showed higher affirmation for the “consume less” item than the PI survey one month earlier, more in line with the earlier PI surveys, supporting footnote 1. The DHM survey had a

higher percentage of younger respondents than PI's December survey², sampling 1200 respondents, 400 each from Washington, Idaho and Oregon and controlled for geographic representation. The DHM 2011 Oregon results for "Our country would better off if we all consumed less" were 78% total agreement comprised of 42% strong agreement while "We need to buy goods to support a strong economy" was 66% total agreement comprised of 15% strong agreement. Results for Washington and Idaho showed several percentage points lower response strength for the consume-less item and several points higher for the "buy goods" item –suggesting that Oregon may have a bit more de-consumption attitude than other states.

These results affirm that 'consume less' remains a strong cognitive attitude even if it shows a slight decline from the past three years of PI surveying (but stable if using the DHM data).

As described in earlier PI writings, it remains an open question if "consume less" possesses any strong policymaker motivations. This is likely due to observed policymaker aversion to articulate the message which might undercut a return to a robust growth economy perceived necessary to support public revenue flows or incongruent with typical commercial interests. Yet, conservative leaders appear more comfortable speaking the language of frugality at least at the government and social-policy levels. Most recently on National Public Radio U.S. House of Representative Speaker John Boehner (January 7, 2011) specifically mentioned the relationship of frugality at *both* individual and policy levels.

Cross-tabulations of respondents in PI's most recent December survey shows that self-identified liberals are more supportive of the consume-less language than conservatives. This reveals a curious dichotomy of the conservative leadership voice appealing to a self identified liberal wing of the culture. This may in part explain some of the crossover toward conservatism observed in the last election. Would this be mirroring the 2010 British elections which yielded leadership transfer from the Labor to the Conservative party? In the UK, the discontent of the left contributed to that historic shift of power, and resulted in an unexpected coalition of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, a platform based on a new localism and economic austerity.

In the U.S., this could also suggest middle ground further eroding on a key reason people decide to vote for a platform or party, as characterized in the CAP "forty ideas which shape American politics survey." (see: http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/03/pdf/political_ideology.pdf)

CONCLUSION: The citizen discontent discussed in Section I suggests a time ripe for unpredictable and dynamic social change, if not upheaval. Status quo politics and policy are being called increasingly to doubt as the general public is reflexively exercising disaffection at the ballot box. Coupling that disaffection with the PI and CAP survey results showing very high cultural agreement toward “conserving energy and consuming fewer goods” suggests that policymakers or parties who do not make strong effort to connect these two issues will cede a powerful linguistic tool, if not outright policy control. Addressing over-consumption with a new austerity confronts the neo-liberal drumbeat of endless growth and affluence. Bridging changed attitudes toward consumption, the role of localism, greater importance on family and community and a range of interconnected and supportive attitudes is not commonly reported in the media or embraced by typical politicians. This may be due perceptions of threat to revenue streams inherent in the conventional business model. This inconsistency is an important source of cultural dissonance and may be the kind of unrest which will topple the status quo. It represents a very interesting and under recognized force in our culture.

PI encourages feedback and suggestions. We invite the reader to explore the unabridged survey questions and responses; available on request– tom@policyinteractive