

Listening to the Voice of Humanity

Steven Kull



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When we look at world conditions and project current trends into the future we see much that is disturbing—environmental degradation, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, persisting poverty and injustice, violent conflict, the fiscal collapse of democratic governments. The institutions that have the greatest power—nation states, corporations, and organized interest groups—seem locked in patterns of self-interested behavior such that the necessary changes are hard to imagine.

Yet when we look to the past we see that there have been remarkable evolutionary changes—the emergence of democracy, the

abolition of slavery, universally recognized principles of the rights of women and minorities, concern for the environment, international laws against aggressive wars and significant efforts by those in wealthy nations to address global poverty. During the run-up to these changes they too surely seemed unimaginable.

So what is it that brings about such shifts? At every point there are self-interested forces that cling to a status quo they prefer or stay locked in polarized patterns that perpetrate a status quo, which few like, but still seems impossible to change. And yet somehow, at key points, a new consciousness emerges in society that is less rigid and polarized and more inclusive and flexible, which gradually prompts changes in the way society is structured.

In formulating retrospective narratives of how such changes occurred, it is common to portray the process as driven by heroic and visionary leaders. No doubt they play a critical role. But the real force of change comes from society itself. Leaders cannot lead people where they do not really want to go. Leaders can only articulate what is already trying to emerge in society and in that way facilitate its realization.

If we think of society as a system, we can look at the various pressures for change and ask what is trying to emerge in that system. If we think of society in human terms, we can ask, what is the whole of society trying to say?

As the world has become more integrated, the challenges that we face have also become more interconnected and global in nature. Thus, the question of what is emergent in society has increasingly become the question of what is emergent in the world as a whole.

Giving Voice to World Public Opinion

While in recent years there has been increasing talk about global society, it is not an entirely new idea. For quite some time people have spoken about world public opinion as a kind of moral force. Even though there was no clear way to define it, there was still a shared sense that it existed and, on some issues, an idea of what it said. However, it was still quite amorphous.

In just the last decade, though, this has changed. For the first time, there have been a substantial number of surveys that have been conducted in parallel in numerous countries—enough to constitute the majority of humanity. These include the surveys conducted by the WorldPublicOpinion.org project, World Values Survey consortium, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, and the BBC World Service polls conducted by GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland.

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Recently, WorldPublicOpinion.org in partnership with the program on Global Governance at the Council on Foreign Relations developed a comprehensive digest that drew together all of these international polls. What we found was quite striking. It revealed a remarkable level of consensus on a wide range of issues facing the planet. [See www.cfr.org/thinktank/iigg/pop for more details including questions and country-by-country findings.]

A key example is the issue of climate change. One might think of climate change as a problem that publics would have trouble relating to. People can barely see its effects and they continue to hear debate within the scientific community. Nonetheless, clear majorities in most nations say that it is necessary to take significant action to address climate change. People express a readiness to accept changes that will require real costs—even when it is put in very specific terms—and to make changes in their lifestyles.

Given that some of these changes will be uncomfortable, you might expect that the dynamic would be one where the government would be pulling on its citizenry to make the necessary

changes, like a parent tugging on a reluctant child. However, the opposite appears to be the case.

In a 2009 WorldPublicOpinion.org poll, in fifteen out of nineteen nations majorities indicated that their government should give higher priority to climate change than it does now. In no nation did more than one in three want their nation to give it a lower priority. On average, 60% of respondents across all nations polled wanted their government to give climate change a higher priority.

One of the biggest obstacles to the resolution of many international issues is the resistance of nation states to subordinate themselves to international law and to give international institutions the necessary power to resolve international problems. Some leaders have even explained that this resistance arises from nationalistic feelings in their populace.

However, international polls again show quite a different picture. Most people around the world support an international order based on international law. Majorities in most countries believe that international laws create normative obligations like domestic law and reject the view that nations should not feel obliged to abide by international law when doing so is at odds with their national interest.

Most significant, publics show a far greater readiness than their national governments to enter into cooperative international efforts to address global issues. Majorities in most countries favor having a much stronger United Nations and favor giving it new powers, such as the power to regulate the international arms trade or to have a standing UN peacekeeping force.

Large majorities in publics around the world, including countries with nuclear arms, favor an international agreement for the elimination of all nuclear weapons that includes intrusive international inspections. Publics worldwide would favor an international regime under the United Nations that would stop new countries from beginning production of nuclear fuel and instead would supply them with the fuel they need for energy production.

Robust majorities approve of the United Nations intervening in the internal affairs of states to investigate human rights abuses. Very large majorities in nearly every nation say that the United Nations should try to further women's rights even when presented the argument that this would conflict with national sovereignty. Perhaps most dramatic, equally large majorities say that the UN has a responsibility to protect people, by force if necessary, from severe human rights abuses by their own government.

Another key area is in regard to poverty and economic development. The UN member states have established a series of key goals for economic and social development called the Millennium Development Goals. A key goal is to cut hunger and severe poverty

in half by the year 2015. While there has been some progress on this front, developed countries have not made the increases in aid that the World Bank has deemed necessary to meet this goal.

WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted a poll of eight developed countries in which respondents were presented the annual per capita contribution that would be necessary for meeting this goal, based on the World Bank estimates. In every case, and in most cases by a large margin, majorities of respondents—on average three out of four—said they were willing to pay the amount necessary to meet the goal, provided that people in other countries did so as well.

Publics as More Receptive to Evolutionary Change

All this is not to say, as some have proclaimed, “vox populi, vox Dei” (the will of the people is the voice of God). However, it does appear that in many cases publics tend to be at least one step ahead of their governments when it comes to addressing important issues. It does appear that the citizenry as a whole is more receptive to emergent ideas prompting key changes.

This dynamic is especially true when it comes to dealing with problems of a global nature that require international cooperation. Nation states as institutions have proven reluctant to cooperate in ways that compromise their sovereignty or their freedom to pursue their maximal national interest. Conflicts are often viewed in terms of narratives of winners and losers in a zero-sum game.

But it appears that individuals as a whole are more ready to cooperate in a global framework and are not as constrained by competitive national narratives. While for most people national identity is strong, most also think of themselves as a global citizen. A World Values Survey found that majorities in 43 of the 46 countries polled said they saw themselves as global citizens—on average 72%.

This difference between individuals and institutions is evident within the nation state as well. Institutions—corporations, interest groups, political parties—tend to pursue a narrowly defined concept of institutional self-interest. Individuals have a more complex and holistic sense of their identity and their interests. They are more likely to think in terms of the common good.

Though individuals have the capacity for a holistic and inclusive perspective this does not mean that all or even most of them do. But taken as an aggregate, the collective often does show these features. Why is that? When all the voices of society are considered on an issue, the self-interested voices, because they differ, tend to cancel each other out, creating a kind of background noise. Those who look at issues with a more a neutral and inclusive consciousness then become the swing vote that creates a dominant perspective.

Some have argued that as long as there is a level playing field and all people have the option to join or form an interest group, when

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interest groups compete the net outcome is something that approximates the will of the people. Some have argued that this market of competing interests has an innate intelligence that is most likely to produce outcomes serving the common good.

But most people around the world do not think that that is what is occurring in their country. Asked by WorldPublicOpinion.org whether their nation is run “for the benefit of all people” or “by a few big interests looking out for themselves” in nearly every nation polled majorities—on average 63%—said it was the latter.

Publics also tend to be less polarized than elected officials. Plotting the position of elected officials on a left-right spectrum, one tends to find a bimodal or u-shaped curve with clusters on the left and right and few in the middle. Thus, it is often difficult to find common ground.

However, the public tends to follow more of a normal curve with a bulge in the middle and few at the extremes. Among the public, most do not strongly position themselves on one or the other end of the spectrum, but rather to try to find ways to balance, and hopefully integrate, the values at the ends of the spectrum.

For this reason people tend to be frustrated with the polarization of party politics. In a poll of 20 nations, large majorities in every nation rejected the views that “when political parties compete for influence in a democracy... the competition of ideas creates a vibrant system where many voices are heard, leading to decisions that best reflect the will of the people.” Rather, large majorities endorsed the view that “the parties fight for their narrow interests, the will of the people is ignored, and the results do not serve the people.”

Increasing the Influence of the Whole

So what do people think should happen? All around the world people seem to think that the will of the people—i.e., the voice of the society as a whole—should play a larger role in government decision-making.

In a poll of 19 nations from around the world, majorities in every nation agreed with the principle enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that “the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government.” On average, 85% agreed.

This does not mean that they think that other more specific elements in society should not also play a role. Asked how much influence the will of the people should have on their government on a 0-10 scale the mean response across 21 nations was 8.0—not the highest possible number, though still quite high.

But this is not what people perceive as occurring. Asked how much their country is governed according to the will of the people the

mean response was 4.6. In every country a majority—on average 73%—said that their country should be governed according to the will of the people more than it is.

What then can be done to increase the influence of the aggregated consciousness of the people? The first step is simply to give the people a greater voice.

Some have argued what is key here is for individuals to step forward and organize themselves into organizations that put forward key ideas and concerns about what needs to happen. This is doubtlessly an important part of the process by which new ideas and concerns are developed and disseminated into society.

However, no individual or group can speak for the society as a whole. To give voice to the whole of society we must go back to the method that the ancient Greeks used to develop the first democratic government. They created their government by selecting people by lot from the whole of the citizenry. In modern vernacular we call it random sampling.

This is the essence of public opinion polls. When a sample, randomly selected from the general public, is asked questions in a clear and unbiased fashion this can provide a useful way to discern the dominant tendency in the public as a whole.

People around the world also want government leaders to pay attention to polls. Even when presented the counter argument that government leaders “should not pay attention to public opinion polls because this will distract them from deciding what they think is right,” in all 18 nations polled majorities said that government leaders “should pay attention to public opinion polls.”

Some people express discomfort with polls. They hear that wording questions differently will produce different results and are afraid that polls are used to misrepresent the public for political ends. This, no doubt, sometimes occurs.

But there are means to address this problem. When public opinion researchers take many different poll results, some of them seemingly contradictory, and analyze the wording carefully, they are generally able to see that there is a reason the public responds differently to different questions. The public’s attitudes are complex and, like the blind men encountering an elephant, each poll finding elucidates one aspect of the whole. However, in putting them all together there is usually a discernible coherent voice.

Another approach that I have found effective in discerning the voice of the public is to take the majority position in numerous polls and to imagine that one ‘person’ had taken all these positions. I have even tried writing out a kind of interview with this collective

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‘person,’ where the answers to a series of questions are all majority positions from different polls. Interestingly this ‘person’ is remarkably reasonable and nuanced. Such an ‘interview’ with the American public can be found at pipa.org/articles/RBF_all.htm.

The Process of Collective Deliberation

Standard polls are not always adequate for giving the public a voice though. On some issues the public does not have enough information or has not had enough time to really sit down and deliberate about tradeoffs. In this case it may be necessary to do in-depth polls where people are given information and presented pro and con arguments. They may also need to wrestle with trade-offs.

In some cases it is necessary to go yet another step and to have representative samples get together in person to deliberate on the issues together before coming to conclusions. All around the world there are exciting new experiments being conducted along these lines. These include the ‘citizen juries,’ ‘deliberative polls,’ ‘Consensus Councils’ or ‘civic lotteries.’

Here again these ideas are popular with publics around the world. Respondents were asked about the possibility of having a large group of randomly selected citizens meet to consider a current issue facing their national legislature; after hearing the full range of arguments they would discuss the issue with others and finally send their collective conclusion to the legislature. In nearly every country, large majorities approved of this idea—on average 68%. Interestingly, in most countries, majorities said they would have more confidence in the conclusions of such a group than the conclusions of their own legislature.

Creating a New Function of Government

Of course, it is not enough to simply give the larger society a voice. It is also essential for the government to actually listen to the people. To ensure this will happen it is probably necessary to make the process of listening to the people an established function of the government. Once again, this is something that people around the world would like to see. In nearly every country polled, majorities have said that they would like their government to establish an agency to study the public’s views on the issues the government is facing. Ethan Leib has made the case that the function of giving voice to the citizenry should become a kind of ‘fourth branch’ of government.

For the government to commit to giving the citizenry a voice would create the possibility to truly go to scale. Rather than just having an occasional poll or citizen jury, there could be a large ongoing representative sample ready to give input to the

government, a Citizen Advisory Panel. All panel members would be linked by the Internet and would be briefed on current issues facing the government and asked for their views. In some cases, it would also make sense to get panel members together in groups to deliberate on the issues together with other panel members. The conclusions would be reported to legislative representatives as well as being released to the general public and the media. To make sure the process is conducted in a fair and unbiased fashion, a board representing different political parties, different sectors of society, and also a small representative sample of citizens would oversee the entire process.

Having a very large Citizen Advisory Panel also makes it possible to hear from subgroups within the citizenry. This can include subgroups based on race, ethnicity, gender and partisan affiliation. Obviously, finding common ground among these different groups is more challenging than finding majority agreement among the general citizenry. But when one is dealing with people who are randomly selected, rather than people who are affiliated with organized interest groups, it is often easier than one expects. People have multiple identities and, as long as they are not committed to being identified with just one of them, they are more apt to find common ground.

Giving voice to the people is not an all-or-nothing proposition. If we think of humanity as a kind of large mural or tapestry, even the most basic poll begins to give us some information about the kind of thinking that is occurring in different corners of the world. With methods that go into greater depth, we gain greater detail and nuance. With coverage of more nations, we gain greater breadth so that we can increasingly get a sense of humanity as a whole.

As many have noted, the most compelling challenges of the future are ones of a global nature, requiring a global response. Nation states are not entirely adequate to these challenges and have prevented international institutions from fully consolidating their capacity for collective action. Like actors in a Greek drama, they seem headed for an impasse with the potential for tragedy. It may be time to shift our attention from the actors to the chorus in the background. Already we can begin to hear a voice of humanity—a voice that is less constrained by established patterns and that offers a more flexible and holistic approach to the challenges we as a species face.

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