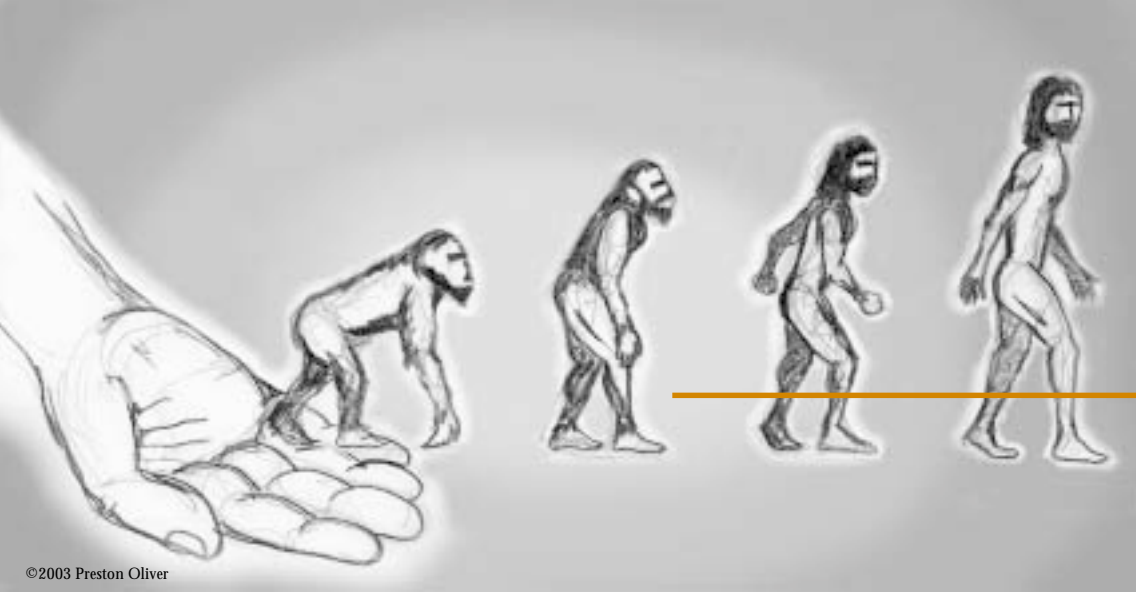


Illusions of an informed public

By George Bishop



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“Intelligent Design”

Despite a pile of evidence showing the American public to be inattentive and uninformed about many aspects of public affairs, national and regional polls frequently fail to screen out respondents who know little or nothing about the subjects of the questions they ask. Not only that, polling organizations often encourage respondents to answer such questions by presuming they are familiar with the topic. Survey questions of this kind typically begin by saying to the respondent, “As you may know...,” or by providing some other informative preamble.

Pollsters generally defend these practices by saying they’re just ways to find out how respondents would think about the issue or topic if they did know more about it. But such practices can result in illusions of an informed public that seriously mislead the policy-making powers that be.

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Recent public opinion polls in Ohio on the issue of “intelligent design” illustrate just how misleading such findings can be. The idea that an intelligent designer or some supernatural force created the universe and guided the development of human life has become the center of a heated controversy among Ohio educators.

For the past year or so, the State Board of Education in Ohio has wrestled with the policy issue of whether to teach intelligent design in public school science classes as an alternative to the scientific theory of evolution. Just recently, according to an Associated Press story of October 15, 2002, a committee of the Ohio Board recommended

...that science classes in the state emphasize both evolution and the debate over its validity... and left it up to individual school districts to decide whether to include in the debate the concept of ‘intelligent design’....

As far as most college and university science professors in Ohio are concerned, however, the concept of intel-

ligent design does not have a shred of scientific evidence to support it and is essentially a religious view that does not belong in the science curriculum of the public schools. Despite this *expert* opinion, “public opinion” polls on the issue have played an important role in telling the powers that be that a seemingly informed public wanted them to do otherwise.

Consider some of the headlines and news stories about public opinion produced by the polls on the intelligent design issue:

- “*Ohioans Don’t Want Evolution Only.*” In an article for the *Columbus Dispatch* (May 10, 2002), Catherine Candisky cited a poll conducted by Zogby International for an intelligent design advocacy group, the Discovery Institute, claiming “...nearly two-thirds of Ohioans support instruction about both Darwin’s theory of evolution and any scientific evidence against it.”

- “*A majority of those surveyed want evolution, intelligent design to get equal time in schools.*” Writing in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (June 9, 2002), Scott Stephens and John Mangels reported the results of a statewide poll commissioned by the *Plain Dealer* and conducted by Mason-Dixon, a Washington-based polling organization. It showed that “A clear majority of the state’s residents—59%—favor teaching evolution in tandem with intelligent design in public school science classes...”

• “*Ohioans: Teach Darwin, Design.*” Picking up on the drumbeat of the *Plain Dealer* poll, the Associated Press (June 2002) told Ohio and the rest of the world that, “A majority of Ohioans want public schools to teach evolution and a concept called ‘intelligent design’ when they discuss how life originated and changed...”

For better or for worse these headlines and news accounts became the *reality* of public opinion for the Ohio Board of Education, editorial writers, various pundits, and, of course, the politicians. To the contrary, I would contend that public opinion on the intelligent design issue, as it was presented in the press, was mostly an illusion produced wittingly or unwittingly by those who commissioned and conducted the polls.

Consider the following piece of evidence from an Ohio Poll conducted by the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati this past September. A statewide sample of Ohioans was asked, “Do you happen to know anything about the concept of ‘intelligent design?’”

Despite the significant coverage, editorials, and polls on the intelligent design issue presented in Ohio’s news media for several months, the vast majority of Ohioans (84%) said no; they knew little or nothing about it. Only 14% said yes (and who knows what they actually knew?), and the rest (2%) were not sure. In other words, the great majority of Ohioans did not know enough about the concept of intelligent design to have formed an opinion.

The vast majority of Ohioans probably also knows little or nothing about the nature of scientific evidence or what a scientific theory of evolution actually means. And yet they appeared to be quite informed about this policy issue, according to the polls conducted by Zogby for the Discovery Institute—an advocacy organization for the intelli-

gent design movement based in Seattle—and by Mason-Dixon for the *Plain Dealer*.

How was this false and misleading impression created? In one instance it was done with leading questions; in the other, by educating the respondents.

The poll conducted by Zogby for the Discovery Institute last May offers a classic example of how to bring a respondent to a desired conclusion. Like many other advocacy polls, the Zogby poll generated the false impression of an informed and opinionated public by first educating respondents about the issue and then asking them whether they had an opinion on it.

In fact, it didn’t even ask respondents whether they had heard or read anything about the intelligent design controversy, but instead informed them in a seemingly evenhanded manner—the standard “fairness” tactic of intelligent design advocates—that “The Ohio State Board of Education is currently trying to decide whether high school students should learn *both* the evidence *for* and *against* Darwin’s theory of evolution” (my emphasis).

They were then asked, “Regarding teaching the theory of evolution, which of the following two statements comes closer to your own opinion—A. Biology teachers should teach only Darwin’s theory of evolution and the scientific evidence that supports it, [or] B. Biology teachers should teach Darwin’s theory of evolution, but also the scientific evidence against it?”

Not surprisingly, nearly two-thirds of Ohioans (65%) picked alternative B, not because they understood anything about scientific evidence, rival scientific theories, or the policy implications of their answers for the controversial decision facing the State Board of Education, but most likely because they endorsed the democratic, fair-

minded idea of presenting evidence for and against any theory. After all, there are two sides to every issue.

Having gotten them to express an opinion with the general “fairness” framing of the issue, the Zogby poll then led respondents to the psychological implications of their answer by asking them, “Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: when Darwin’s theory of evolution is taught in school, students should also *be able to learn* about scientific evidence that points to an *intelligent design* of life?” (my emphasis).

Even though most respondents had probably never heard or read a thing about the concept of intelligent design, by a margin of more than six to one they were more likely to agree (78%) than disagree (13%) with this apparently evenhanded proposition, with just 9% saying they were not sure. Ergo, the *Columbus Dispatch* headline, “Ohioans Don’t Want Evolution Only” represented what appeared to be an example of a well-formed “public opinion” on a controversial issue confronting the State Board of Education.

Nor was this the only example of seemingly well-informed public opinion on the intelligent design issue. Just several weeks later the statewide poll commissioned by the *Plain Dealer* gave the exact same impression of a decided majority. Though better designed, free of advocacy, and much more comprehensive than those in the Zogby poll, the questions asked in the *Plain Dealer* survey (which was also the basis for the Associated Press story) created the same misleading impression of an informed public that understood the complexities of the intelligent design issue and had formed an opinion on it.

But when asked how familiar they were with the concept of intelligent design,

less than one of five (18%) said they were very familiar with the idea; 37% indicated they were just somewhat familiar with it; and close to half (45%) admitted they were not that familiar at all with the notion.

Regardless of how familiar they were with the idea of intelligent design, the *Plain Dealer* poll educated respondents about it in a follow-up question and then asked them to pass judgement on its validity:

The concept of intelligent design is that life is too complex to have developed by chance, and a purposeful being or force is guiding the development of life. Which of the following best describes your view of intelligent design...?

About a fourth (23%) considered it a completely valid account of how humans were developed; nearly half (48%) regarded it as a somewhat valid account; and just 22% thought it was not a valid account. The rest said they were not sure. But what could the public's understanding of *validity* possibly mean?

Furthermore, as reporters Stephens and Mangels made clear in their analysis of the poll, the great majority of respondents understood the religious undertones of the question about "a purposeful being or force that is guiding the development of life": "Two-thirds of the poll respondents," they wrote, "believe the unspecified 'designer' in intelligent design really is God. In fact, that's part of the attraction."

For many respondents, then, the question on intelligent design got interpreted not so much as a question about how human life actually developed, but rather as a test of whether they believed in God, making it much easier for them to generate an opinion on the concept of intelligent design.

Having brought the respondents up to intellectual speed with prior explanations of intelligent design and questions about God's role in the development of life on earth, the poll then got to the heart of the "equal time" issue by asking them the following question:

Currently, the Ohio Board of Education is debating new academic standards for public school science classes, including what to teach about the development of life on earth. Which position do you support—teach only evolution, teach only intelligent design, teach both, teach the evidence both for and against evolution, but not necessarily intelligent design, or teach nothing about human development?

Unsurprisingly, given the fairness framing of the issue, a sizable majority (59%) of those polled favored the evenhanded position of "teach both." The *Plain Dealer* could now characterize public opinion in Ohio on the issue as decisive: "A majority of those surveyed want evolution, intelligent design to get equal time in school." Case closed.

Far from an isolated example, the sort of illusion of public opinion generated by the Zogby and *Plain Dealer* polls on the issue of intelligent design represents an all too common occurrence in contemporary survey research. As I have argued elsewhere, such illusions have become more ubiquitous than ever, not only because of the proliferation of "pseudo-polls" in the mass media that give the false impression of a public which has opinions on nearly every topic under the sun, but also because of chronic problems in the practice of asking survey questions: widespread public ignorance of public affairs, the inherent vagueness of the language used in most survey questions, and the unpredict-

able influence of variations in question form, wording, and context.

The danger in all this, of course, is that because there is typically no peer review of such "direct-to-the-media" polls, nor any sort of journalistic gatekeeping (as Frank Newport pointed out in the February/March 1998 issue of *Public Perspective*), virtually no one can tell the difference once the poll results are released to the public.

The prestige of the polling organization releasing the results and the statistical percentages, accompanied by the usual reassuring scientific statement about sampling error, give the impression that it is all just as reality-based as a standard pre-election poll. Unlike pre-election polls, however, there is no Wednesday morning reality check with behavioral evidence. The result is a misled and unprotected public.

Many pollsters may, of course, prefer to continue business as usual, manufacturing opinions with lead-in phrases like, "As you may know..." and other preambles that educate the respondent. If, on the other hand, they were to use filter questions on a regular basis to screen out the less well-informed, it would probably not make good copy to report, again and again, that large numbers of citizens, and in some cases majorities, have no opinions on issues of everyday discourse in elite political, journalistic, and academic circles.

But I think we do the public and the powers that be a great disservice by continuing to manufacture artificial and illusory portraits of an informed public opinion on issues like intelligent design, when we could do so much better. In the case of intelligent design, the power of the pollsters did a great disservice to the scientific community as well. ●