

American Public Says Government Leaders Should Pay Attention to Polls

March 21, 2008

Eight in Ten Say Public Should Have Greater Influence on Government

[Questionnaire \(PDF\)](#)



In sharp contrast to views recently expressed by Vice President Cheney, a new poll finds that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe government leaders should pay attention to public opinion polls and that the public should generally have more influence over government leaders than it does.

Vice President Dick Cheney in an ABC News interview aired March 19, 2008

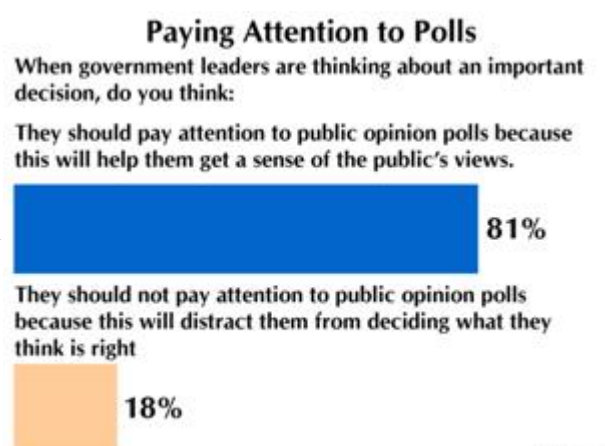
Eighty-one percent say when making "an important decision" government leaders "should pay attention to public opinion polls because this will help them get a sense of the public's views." Only 18 percent said "they should not pay attention to public opinion polls because this will distract them from deciding what they think is right."

When ABC News correspondent Martha Raddatz cited polling data showing majority opposition to the Iraq war, Cheney responded, "So?" Asked, "So--you don't care what the American people think?" he responded, "No," and explained, "I think you cannot be blown off course by the fluctuations in the public opinion polls."

Americans also roundly reject the position put forward by White House spokeswoman Dana Perino in an effort to explain Cheney's comments. Asked whether the public should have "input," she replied, "You had your input. The American people have input every four years, and that's the way our system is set up."

When Americans are asked whether they think that "elections are the only time when the views of the people should have influence, or that also between elections leaders should consider the views of the people as they make decisions," an extraordinary 94 percent say that government leaders should pay attention to the views of the public between elections.

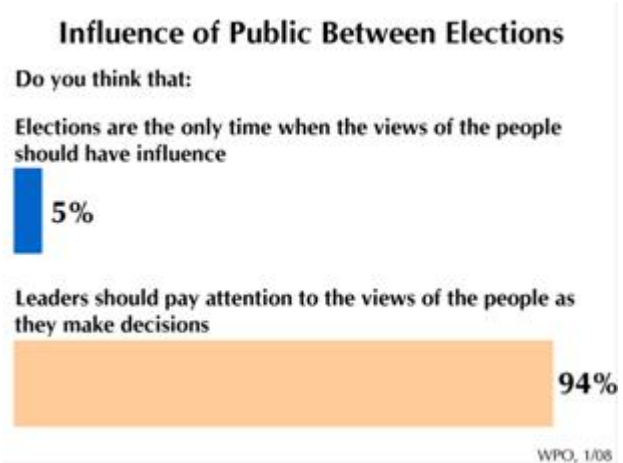
These findings are part of a larger international poll conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org, an international



research project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. The poll of 975 Americans was fielded from January 18 to 27 by Knowledge Networks. The margin of error was +/-3.2 percent.

The focus of the study is the principle expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that "The will of the people should be the basis of the authority of government." Presented this statement, 87 percent of Americans say they agree with it.

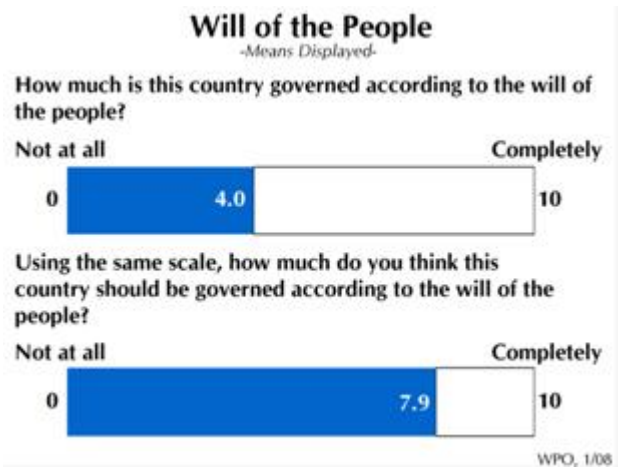
However, Americans are not satisfied with the extent that the will of the people does govern. Asked, "How much is this country governed according to the will of the people?" and asked to answer on a scale with 0 meaning "not at all" and 10 meaning "completely," the mean response is 4.0. Asked how much the country should be governed according to the will of the people, the mean response is 7.9.



Eighty-three percent of respondents say that the will of the people should have more influence that it does.

Closely related to the dissatisfaction with the degree of government responsiveness to the public is the widespread perception that decisions are not being made in the public's interest. Asked, "Generally speaking, would you say that this country is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" just 19 percent say it is run for the benefit of all the people, while 80 percent say it is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.

The net effect seems to be a diminished trust in government. Asked, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the national government in Washington to do what is right?" 60 percent say "only some of the time" while 37 percent say most of the time and 3 percent just about always.



Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org and PIPA, comments, "While Americans do not say that leaders should always follow the will of the public, they do think that American leaders should be considerably more responsive to the people and should even pay attention to polls. Dismissing the public as irrelevant and incompetent only contributes to already low levels of trust in government."

The findings of the larger WorldPublicOpinion.org study, which will include findings from approximately 20 countries from around the world, will be released in early May.

The US poll was an online survey drawn from a nationally representative sample of the Knowledge Networks online panel. This panel is probabilistically-based, selected from the population of US telephone households and subsequently provided with an Internet connection if needed. For more information on the methods, see www.KnowledgeNetworks.com/ganp