

**Does Public Opinion Count? Tuition Fees, Student Support, and Public Opinion
in Saskatchewan, 1991-2004**

by

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ABSTRACT

Democratic responsiveness posits that decision-makers should listen and respond to public opinion about policy issues when making public policy. While there is not always an apparent link between public opinion and public policy outcomes, this project proposes that public opinion does matter, and that we can gain a better understanding of the link between public opinion and public policy by looking at sixteen measures of public opinion, focusing on the provincial level, looking at the full policy process, and asking members of public policy communities what expressions of public opinion are important to them.

By constructing a policy history and interviewing key people involved in university tuition fee and government student loan policy community in Saskatchewan between 1991 and 2004 (senior civil servants, ministerial assistants, deputy ministers, elected officials, journalists, public opinion researchers, university presidents, and student union representatives), I propose a clearer picture of their perceptions of the link between public opinion and public policy in this area, through the use of crosstabulation and significance testing.

Their understanding of public opinion, the public policy process, and the role of opinion in policy-making relate to the value they place on public opinion in the formation of university tuition fee policies and government student loan programs during this time. Members of different policy community groups defined public opinion in different ways, including how they defined the public and how to measure public opinion. Government-commissioned polling was important, but other measures of opinion were also important. While most interviewees noted that there is a role for public opinion in policy-making,

they emphasized its role at different points in the policy process. Convergence in public opinion and the salience of post-secondary education issues to the public were also important for policy actors. Finally, non-responsiveness was explained by a number of interviewees as a function of which public was most impacted by the policy decision, and as a product of a trade-off for limited resources.

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This dissertation is dedicated to all of those students who sat out in the cold during the fight for the tuition fee freeze; those who presented briefs to the Standing Committees of Parliament and the Legislature; who saw their tuition fees (and debt levels) increase exponentially during the 1990s and into the 2000s; and for those who haven't considered attending a university because of the costs.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: DOES PUBLIC OPINION COUNT?

Introduction

Understanding public opinion and its relationship to public policy has become a central part of discussions around democracy in twenty-first century North America. It seems that public opinion (assessed primarily between elections), whether it is assessed through polls and focus groups, letters to the editor, letters to elected officials, interest group communications, or media (such as talk radio shows and columnists), has become part of public policy making in various ways. Members of the mass public, as well as active policy actors (leaders of interest groups, civil servants, and elected officials), are hearing about and appealing to public opinion (Page 2006; Butler 2007). It has become difficult to open a newspaper or watch television news without hearing about the results of the latest poll (Herbst 2001; Kenamer 1994; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Technological innovations have increased the ability to measure opinion, and the public opinion industry has become increasingly visible.

In trying to understand the links between public policy and public opinion, most democratic responsiveness theories purport that strong public opinion in one direction or another will (and should) be reflected in the policies and procedures of a representative government. Responsiveness theories posit that when public opinion shifts, or when it strongly supports or opposes particular policies, public policy will (also) shift as a result.¹ Much of this research focuses on quantitative analysis of correlations between public

¹ Although there is a clearly a normative aspect to democratic responsiveness theories, for the purposes of this dissertation, focus will be primarily on any observed relationships or non-relationships between public policy and opinion rather than on what those relationships should or should not be.

policy shifts and public opinion trends at the national state level (see Soroka and Wlezien 2003; Brooks 1985; Petry 1999) However, there is a limited understanding of how members of policy communities view public opinion and how they use it. It is critical to further explore how these actors define public opinion and what connections they might make between opinion and public policy. Further, it is unclear how they would account for a seeming lack of concern for public opinion in policy cases where opinion deviates from policy outcomes.

It seems likely that how decision-makers understand public opinion (what forms it takes, how it is measured, and its potential usefulness) should influence whether or not they take it into consideration at all (Herbst 1998). Recent research undertaken by François Petry and Matthew Mendelsohn (2004), Petry (2007), and Page (2006) at the Canadian level with elected and government officials, as well as that done in the United States with similar groups (see Herbst 1998), has shown that different groups of actors have very different conceptions of what constitutes public opinion. Influential public opinion can include citizens' letters to newspaper editors, op-ed columns in newspapers, elite and interest group communications, as well as the commonly commissioned and reported-on opinion poll.

Problem

Scholars have wrestled with the problem of democratic responsiveness – what constitutes responsiveness, who is responsive to what, and how to assess what responsiveness looks like – within the context of public opinion studies for the past hundred years. In a democratic system that has seen greater demands from the public for

involvement in policy making through consultation and for greater responsiveness to public opinion, it is important to gain a greater understanding of how, when, and why governments respond – or choose not to respond – to pressures from public opinion.

Public opinion research, including information gathered through the use of polling and/or focus groups, can play a number of important informational roles for democratic governments. It may be considered a way of communicating with the public and assessing their opinions on particular policy problems, possible solutions, or on policies, programs, and services themselves. It may also be used to assess attitudes, values, and beliefs around general issues; without focusing on specific programs or services – acting as a barometer of where the public “is at”.

Governments may respond to these expressed opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and values in a number of different ways, ranging from full-out policy responsiveness to complete non-responsiveness. They may also choose to use the results from opinion research to shape educational and communications messaging which is designed to change citizens’ opinions and behaviours (Page 2006). In addition, public opinion research has increasingly been used as a way to benchmark and track opinions for the purposes of performance measurement (Page 2006; Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2000). Saskatchewan’s government seems to make use of public opinion research in all of these ways, at different times and in different policy domains.²

² These two paragraphs are taken directly from Rounce's “Public Opinion Research in the Saskatchewan Government”, a paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association’s Annual Meetings in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on May 30, 2007.

Purpose of the Study

One way to attempt to address these questions and to further our understanding of the relationship(s) between public policy and public opinion is to examine the views of the policy actors themselves. This study is designed to make use of existing public opinion and policy data, while expanding the scope of knowledge through self-administered questionnaires and interviews with members of the policy community.

Research Questions

Overall, three research questions shape this study on public opinion and public policy.

They are:

1. How do political actors define public opinion? What are the most important measures for different groups of actors?
2. How does public opinion impact public policy formation in this particular policy area: university tuition fees and student loans?
3. How would actors account for a seeming lack of concern for public opinion in particular policy cases, where opinion clearly deviates from policy outcomes?

Hypotheses

The proposed nine hypotheses provide possible explanations for what is seen in the policy case study.

H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways. As has been demonstrated in a number of studies, public opinion means very different things to different people. Current focus is on public opinion as measured in

opinion polls and focus groups, but it also can be understood as letters from constituents, media communication, and interest group communication.

H2: In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups. It is possible that knowing that the product of the public opinion research is to be automatically publicly released – without waiting for a citizen to submit a Freedom of Information request – may have an impact both on what questions are asked and on the use of their results.

H3: There is an identified role(s) for public opinion in policy-making that differs by policy community membership.

H4: Policy community members have different conceptions of *where* in the policy cycle public opinion is important for themselves and for most other policy actors.

H5: How political actors define public opinion (in terms of measurement) is related to its role in policy-related activities. For example, if opinion is defined as being measured through polling and government-commissioned polls are seen as being less useful than other forms of opinion measurement, that reality will have an impact on an actors' use of polls in decision making.

H6: Convergence in public opinion is more likely to have an impact on political actors than opinion that does not overwhelmingly support one policy direction or another.

H7: Issue salience is key. If a majority of citizens identify an issue as a priority (such as through a poll or survey), political actors are more likely to respond to public opinion on the issue.

H8: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when it is more salient to a particular public that is less politically powerful.

H9: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when the policy trade-offs required would result in a backlash from a wider public.

Overview of Methodology

As noted previously, much of the research focusing on the opinion-policy relationship in Canada to date has been strictly quantitative in nature and carried out at the national level. These studies focus on calculating correlations between the results of national public opinion polls, such as those done by Gallup and POLLARA in Canada, and shifts in national public policy (see Brooks 1985; Petry 1999; Wlezian and Soroka 2003).

There are four prominent gaps left by this approach: the provincial situation, the experiences of policy makers themselves, the types of policy areas explored, and the limited way in which public opinion has been measured. First, little attention has been paid to looking at what happens in the provinces (outside of Quebec), and whether or not this is consistent with responsiveness or non-responsiveness models. This is due in part to the inaccessibility of government-commissioned polling data. Second, while this national state level work is immensely important, it does not allow for more detailed and nuanced questions around how actors' perceptions impact a particular policy area. Until the most recent work by Petry and Mendelsohn (2005) examined federal policy actors and their perceptions of public opinion, little work had been done on how actors themselves are impacted by and/or shape public opinion.

Third, because of the quantitative methodology and limitations posed by existing surveys, there are gaps in the policy issues that have been examined as part of longitudinal research. Thus, focus has been on issues under the control/jurisdiction of the federal government. Fourth, although this study makes use of government-sponsored and private industry polling data, public opinion is defined more widely than just polling in order to gain insight into what types of opinion might be excluded from the discussion.³

This study provides initial insight into these four gaps. First, the focus of this research is on the province of Saskatchewan, using publicly available opinion data and interviews with members of the policy community. Second, understanding how various actors involved in the policy making process conceptualize public opinion can help to clarify the impact of public opinion on policy making. This is accomplished through the

³ This section was developed in Rounce's "Valuing Public Opinion: Political Actors' Assessment of Opinion", a paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research Annual Conference in Montreal, Quebec, 2006.

use of self-administered questionnaires and telephone interviews with the policy community in the province. Third, the focus is on provincial post-secondary education funding policies – policies not previously included in Canadian public opinion-policy research, partly because of jurisdictional focus. Interviews conducted with present and former Saskatchewan pollsters, government officials, interest group members, elected officials, and media people will cast light on the importance of different forms of public opinion in the context of a small province.

Finally, expanding the definition of public opinion to include letters to the editor, opinion-editorial pieces, and interest group communications as well as polling results serves to provide a more complete picture of public opinion and provides a solid basis for analysis of public opinion's impact on policy actors and policy outcomes. It is important to note that the increased reporting of the results of polls by the media as synonymous with public opinion may be problematic for gaining a fuller understanding of public opinion. By not acknowledging that opinion is being expressed through other venues (such as letters to the editor and constituent letters to elected officials), we fail to gain a clearer, more complete picture of both what public opinion is and what decision-makers may be responding to or working to shape.⁴

Case Study

Saskatchewan provides a useful case study both because of its approach to policy making in the post-secondary sector and for the way it manages government-sponsored public opinion research. Between 1991 and 2004 Saskatchewan had one primary governing party (including one short-lived coalition government) with two Premiers who

⁴ This paragraph is taken directly from Rounce 2006, p. 9.

had very different styles of governance and perceptions of public opinion. During this time, Saskatchewan faced fiscal uncertainties and the need to rebalance spending and revenues, yet it was the only province which did not cut funding to post-secondary institutions to the same degree as other provinces when faced with federal cuts to transfer payments throughout the 1990s (CAUT 2007).

In a small province such as Saskatchewan, citizens tend to have greater access to both elected and departmental officials, which may change the impact public opinion (in its various forms) has on public policy making. In addition, Saskatchewan is one of the only provinces undertaking public opinion research that publishes the results of its opinion surveys on a regular basis, and has done so since early 1992. It is anticipated that assessing the responsiveness of a system which makes use of these public opinion processes (and seemingly values democratic responsiveness) will make a contribution to the literature on the connection between public opinion and public policy.

In order to further explore the links between public opinion and policy, this research focuses on the connection between public opinion and public policy using post-secondary education funding policies (university tuition fees and student loan funding) in a Canadian province – Saskatchewan – between 1991 and 2004 as a case study. By looking at an issue that is primarily provincially controlled, like post-secondary tuition fees and student loan policy, it should be possible to assess how the policy-opinion nexus might work in different governance situations.⁵

The choice of policy area for this study is due to two major factors: the lack of research around public opinion regarding post-secondary education generally and the

⁵ These three paragraphs are taken directly from Rounce 2006, pp. 7-8.

growing public importance of this area for both provincial and federal governments in Canada. Post-secondary education in the twenty-first century has become accepted by most Canadians as a necessity for active participation in the economy. As the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) noted in 1999,

...The importance of postsecondary education in Canadian society has never been greater. Knowledge, information, and education are critical, and growing numbers of people of all ages are pursuing postsecondary education and training (1).

The transition to a knowledge-based economy (KBE) and the importance of “human capital” for Canada’s ability to compete in a global market are part of this public discussion around post-secondary education. A growing number of people expect their children to attend a post-secondary institution, yet they express concern about rising tuition fees and the increasing amount of personal debt carried by students (Bouchard and Zhao 2000; Shipley, Ouellette, and Cartwright 2003; Canadian Council on Learning 2007). Polling data shows that concerns about tuition fees and the larger issue of access to education have been increasing for most Canadian people in all provinces and territories.

University tuition fees and student loan programming illustrate a primarily provincially-controlled policy area which has an active policy community and an evolving relationship between public opinion and public policy. Saskatchewan universities are considered to be autonomous entities and are responsible for establishing their tuition fee levels (Sancton 2006; University of Regina Act; University of Saskatchewan Act). However, there has been a strong relationship between government support (or lack of support) for university operations and a corresponding increase in

tuition fees. Thus, government support for university operating grants is tightly connected to the universities' decisions to increase fees.

Discussion around university tuition fees is often accompanied by discussion around student loan programs. Historically, Saskatchewan has had a student loan program which began with a focus on providing bursaries, which evolved into a focus on targeted bursaries and greater loan values, and which has more recently evolved into a program focused on providing greater access to funds for students – whether loan or bursary. The relationship between Saskatchewan's program and the federal program and the way that the program has been delivered changed between 1991 and 2004: a joint program throughout much of the 1990s, the provincial and federal governments formally integrated their programming in 2001. However, although there are some elements of provincial student loan programs that are tied to their federal counterparts, provincial governments have the ability to make many changes to these programs without the consent (or support) of the federal government.

During the 1990s, Saskatchewan's policies around student loans and tuition fees did not always coincide with what the public wanted to see government doing, as measured by publicly-available polling data and media coverage. The changes made during this time period reflected policy choices being made by government as post-secondary education access was becoming more important to Saskatchewan people.

Data

For the purposes of this research, the data used to assess both policy shifts and public opinion are drawn from government policy documents (including annual reports,

press releases, and program documentation), government public opinion reporting, a media scan of the two primary daily newspapers (Regina Leader-Post and Saskatoon Star Phoenix), and questionnaires and interviews completed with policy actors in the Saskatchewan post-secondary education sector.

The first stage of the research involves a reconstruction of the policy environment, including changes and shifts in the policy community and in public policy, between 1991 and 2004. This also includes an assessment of what was happening in federal policy around post-secondary education, various provincial reviews and assessment of post-secondary education, and public opinion in the province around post-secondary education.

The primary public opinion polling data used comes from the Government of Saskatchewan's publicly-released polls, conducted between 1992 and 2004. In terms of how public opinion research is commissioned, organized, and funded, Saskatchewan differed from other provincial governments during this period in a number of respects. One of the key differences is that the government released the results of all quantitative public opinion research – public opinion polling – since 1991 as a response to newly introduced Freedom of Information Legislation and concern about transparency and openness in public opinion research reporting.

Saskatchewan's two main daily newspapers – the Regina Leader-Post and the Saskatoon Star Phoenix – have served as a major source of policy-related information for people in the province throughout this period of time. Tracking the change in discourse and in the actors involved in the policy community is a key element provided by this data source.

Another key data source is policy actors themselves. In assessing which political actors to include in this study, it becomes necessary to understand how the policy community is constructed. Pross (1986) defines a policy community as

that part of the system that – by virtue of its functional responsibilities, its vested interests, and its specialized knowledge – acquires a dominant voice in determining government decisions in a specific field of public activity, and is generally permitted by society at large and the public authorities in particular to determine public policy in that field (98).

Saskatchewan is a small province, with a relatively small and interknit policy community. In this case, the primary members of this community include elected officials (the Minister in charge of the relevant policy areas and Official Opposition Members of the Legislative Assembly [MLAs]), Ministerial Assistants (staff to Cabinet Ministers), Deputy Ministers, senior departmental civil servants (Associate and Assistant Deputy Ministers, Executive Directors, and Directors), public opinion researchers (those who undertook both publicly-commissioned and unpublished polls and conducted focus groups), and two interest or advocacy groups - Student Union Representatives and University Presidents. Members of the media were also included where possible, making a total of eight groups to be involved in the policy community and the research project. Initially, it was anticipated that political party Presidents would also be included in the policy community. However, after preliminary interviews with former party presidents, it was determined that they were not in fact key members of this particular policy community.

In total, approximately forty questionnaires have been included and thirty-five semi-structured telephone interviews conducted with policy actors falling into these categories. By further exploring perceptions around public opinion and public policy, it

will be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between these in a provincial situation.⁶

Significance of the Study

Completing this study, and gaining a clearer understanding of how public opinion interacts with government policy decisions will help to address the four prominent gaps in policy-opinion research noted earlier: the public opinion and policy relationship at the provincial level, the experiences of policy makers themselves (including how opinion impacts decision-making), the types of policy areas explored, and the limited way in which public opinion has been measured. Additionally, the value of opinion polling and other forms of opinion measurement for decision-making and other activities of government will be addressed.

By constructing a clear picture of the policy history, including policy discussions and public opinion data, it should be possible to gain an understanding of what happened in this underexplored policy area during this time, what the public thought of these changes, and whether public opinion had any impact on the policy changes. It will also be possible to understand how political actors define and view public opinion and how (if at all) it affects them in the decision making process. Overall, it is anticipated that this research will help to provide a clearer understanding of what public opinion means to public decision makers and how they assess its importance, thus contributing to the literature around democratic responsiveness.

⁶ This section taken directly from Rounce 2006, pp. 10-11.

Limitations

Limitations of the Public Opinion Data

There are limitations to relying on government-commissioned polling results. The original data files are not available, so it is impossible to do additional and in-depth research based on what is publicly available. While some polling was commissioned by the Conservative government in 1990 and 1991, this data is not accessible. The Freedom of Information Act 1991, introduced by the out-going Conservative government, led to the newly-elected NDP government establishing an internal policy facilitating the public release of all quantitatively-based public opinion research in 1991. Over the years, this policy has manifested in the release of frequency-based reports, with the occasional inclusion of bivariate analysis, but without access to more detailed analysis or to the data sets themselves. In fact, it is unclear whether government actually received any data sets during this time period.

An additional issue with the polling is that it is not undertaken on a regular basis. In some years, polling is done monthly. However, other years – for various reasons – see much more irregular polling. Also, questions are not asked consistently throughout the fourteen year period, causing continuity of assessment to be problematic. However, questions asked at different points in time clearly indicate issues pertinent to government discussion and to policy decisions being made. In addition, questions that are not repeated (possibly due to negative results or changing government priorities) are in themselves useful indicators of public opinion and government response.⁷

⁷ These two paragraphs are from Rounce 2006, p. 10.

Limitations of the Policy Community Census

Attempting to recreate historical public opinion in a study such as this has its challenges. The majority of the policy actors who were part of the post-secondary education policy community between 1991 and 2004 were still contactable. However, several noted that their memories around certain issues were not as clear as they would hope. There was memory-related variation within the subcategories of the sample, but all efforts were made to ensure that when respondents were unclear about their recollections, these responses were noted and removed from the analysis.

An additional challenge – given that the NDP party remained in government until November 2007 – was that many of the elected officials were either still in government or had been returned to opposition ranks when the interviews were undertaken. This made elected officials more challenging to access, and many – particularly those who ran again in 2007 – were less likely to agree to participate in this study than those who intended to leave politics. Given Saskatchewan's tightly-knit policy community, many of the former community members have held various positions in the community: it was not unusual to find former student union representatives in ministerial office positions or in government departments, for example. Some of these respondents expressed concern about their ability to speak freely about their experiences, given their current work.

A final challenge related to the sample was identifying and locating members of the former and evolving policy community. Government telephone books were used to identify the potential members in government, but there were a number of years in which no paper books were actually issued. In those years, electronic versions were updated regularly, but only the most recent version was made available: updates were simply

copied into the existing file, rather than creating a new file each time and leaving the previous files accessible. Student union representatives were also challenging to identify and locate at times, particularly when political situations within the unions were volatile. Internet search engines (particularly Google), provincial and national-level telephone directories (Mysask.com; Canada 411), and current online government directories were invaluable in locating potential respondents.

Clipping files were used to help recreate not only the members of the policy community (including interest groups) and the discourse surrounding the issues, but also who addressed these issues through the major daily newspapers in the province. Searches for key words were used in both electronic and microfiche/ microfile records. In addition, I accessed the files put together by the librarians of the Saskatchewan Legislative Library. Although a thorough attempt was made to ensure that all records related to post-secondary education financing/funding, tuition fees, and student loans were pulled, it is not possible to be completely certain that this is the case.

Delimitations

This study focuses on the years 1991 to 2004, inclusive. This period was chosen in order to maximize the number of data points available, as it includes three elections, thirteen budgets, thirteen Speeches from the Throne, and approximately twelve years of public opinion data commissioned by the provincial government. During this time, the New Democratic Party (NDP) formed government (with one coalition government) exclusively, although under two different leaders. Although tempting to continue this research to include events up to Fall 2007 and the transition from NDP-led government to Saskatchewan Party-led government, this temptation was resisted due to time limitations.

Definition of Key Terms

Public Opinion – Public opinion is a difficult term to define with great certainty. For this research, I will draw on Glynn et al (2004) and their five-part definition of public opinion: 1) public opinion is an aggregation of individual opinions; 2) public opinion is a reflection of majority beliefs; 3) public opinion is found in the clash of group interests; 4) public opinion is media and elite opinion; and 5) public opinion is a fiction. All elements of this definition will be developed and drawn on for this study.

Public Policy – Two definitions – emphasizing the expanse and nature of public policy – are key for this study. First, B. Guy Peters (1993) states that "public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens" (4). The deliberate nature of public policy is emphasized by Brooks and Milijen (2006), who note that "Policy involves conscious choice that leads to deliberate *action* – the passage of a law, spending of money, an official speech or gesture, or some other observable act – or *inaction*" (2-3, emphasis added).

Public Policy Cycle – For this research, policy making is understood to have five stages: 1) agenda setting, 2) problem definition, 3) policy design/formulation, 4) policy implementation, and 5) policy evaluation. Public opinion may have an impact at any of these stages in the cycle.

Policy Community – A policy community can be defined as "that part of the system that – by virtue of its functional responsibilities, its vested interests, and its specialized

knowledge – acquires a dominant voice in determining government decisions in a specific field of public activity, and is generally permitted by society at large and the public authorities in particular to determine public policy in that field (Pross 1986, 98). Coleman and Skogstad (1990) define the policy community “...to include all actors or potential actors with a direct or indirect interest in a policy area of function who share a common “policy focus”, and who, with varying degrees of influence shape policy outcomes over the long run” (25). Members of the policy community in this study include elected officials, staff to elected officials, senior civil servants, interest group leaders (student union representatives and university presidents), pollsters, and media.

Post-Secondary Education Funding Policy – Includes university tuition fees and Saskatchewan government student loan programming.

Outline of the Dissertation

This study is a work in seven parts. Chapter Two outlines the conceptual framework shaping the dissertation research. Questions around public opinion and public policy, around the “sometime connection” between opinion and policy, and around how public policy is made are addressed in this chapter. Next the research design and methodology are discussed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four provides the policy history, including post-secondary education policy, public opinion, and political, economic, and social environment history for the case study used in the project. Chapters Five and Six present an analysis of the information provided by members of the policy community through their responses to questionnaires and in interviews, and discusses the findings in

relation to the research questions. Finally, the dissertation concludes in Chapter Seven with an assessment of initial results, questions still to be addressed, and research work to be undertaken next.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In order to understand and explore the relationships between public opinion and public policy, it is necessary to first understand the concepts and framework underlying the component ideas. This chapter outlines the conceptual and analytical framework for this research project, including the definition and nature of public policy; the framework used for understanding the post-secondary education policy community in Saskatchewan; the concept of the political system, which provides the foundation for understanding the process, actors, behaviours, and institutions of public policy making; the varied definitions, understandings, and nature of public opinion are discussed along with a constructivist perspective of public opinion; and the ‘sometime’ connections between public opinion research and public policy making⁸ – reflecting the varied definitions of public opinion. Finally, this chapter concludes with an overall assessment of the conceptual framework, providing a foundation for the operationalization and design of the research project in Chapter 3.

Defining Public Policy

It has often been said that there are as many definitions of public policy as there are scholars of public policy. However, most definitions tend to have three elements in common: the primacy of government, policy as process as well as outcome, and policy as problem-oriented behaviour. First, government is understood to be the agent of public

⁸ Sharp (1998) refers to the connection between public policy and public opinion as the “sometime” connection, in her book “The Sometime Connection”.

policy, in that decision-makers within government make choices about policies (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Dye 1972). Les Pal (2006) defines public policy as “a course of action or inaction, chosen by *public authorities* to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems” (36, emphasis added). Howlett and Ramesh (2003) note that “...decisions *by governments* to retain the status quo are just as much policy as are decisions to alter it” (5, emphasis added).

Second, public policy is often seen as being reflective of a process – a “...set of inter-related decisions” (Jenkins 1978 as cited in Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 6). Howlett and Ramesh (2003) argue that rather than being one finite choice, “most policies involve a series of decisions, some of which may be inadvertent rather than deliberate” (6; see also Nagel 2002).

Third, policy is understood to have a specific purpose: to be a response to a problem (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Anderson 1984; Shafritz and Russell 2008). It is goal-oriented behaviour – governments define a goal (to solve a problem), and policies are ideally constructed to meet that goal(s). McArthur (2007) emphasizes this by saying “Policy encompasses the things governments do intentionally in order to achieve change in the larger society....[it is] *purposeful and planned*” (240, emphasis added).

There are limitations to many of the existing definitions of public policy. For example, when it comes to unconstrained choice, Pal (2006) argues that policy makers may not be wilfully “choosing” their policies. Instead, in the implementation process, policies might be defined in a way which was not originally intended or may evolve based on past intentions. Government may be bounded in terms of its ability to make choices around policy, and to implement those choices.

Additionally, there is a question around whether or not all public policies should be considered equal. Sharkansky (1971) would suggest not, arguing that it is important to ask whether or not a policy activity has financial value, whether it affects many individuals, and how intensely it affects those individuals (8). Additionally, Sharkansky (1971) notes that there is also a range of types of policies, “ranging from the tangible to the symbolic” (8). Others have argued that inaction is just as important as action, when it comes to defining public policy (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Pal 2006).

For the purpose of this project, two interconnected definitions of public policy will inform the conceptual framework. First, B. Guy Peters states that “public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens” (1993, 4). The deliberate nature of public policy is emphasized by Brooks and Milijen (2006), who note that “Policy involves conscious choice that leads to deliberate *action* – the passage of a law, spending of money, an official speech or gesture, or some other observable act – or *inaction*” (2-3, emphasis added). This definition of policy includes both tangible actions – such as spending or legislative action – but it also includes the symbolic, such as making a speech or taking some kind of symbolic approach.

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) also point to the importance in identifying how to measure policy as part of assessing change over time. They argue that “it cannot be accomplished by simply going through the official records of government decision-making found in such forms as laws, acts, regulations, and promulgations” (7). Because of the need to assess the range of potential choices and the choices not made, it is necessary to also understand the range of actors involved in policy making, the potential

options, actors' preferences, and choices made (Howlett 1986; Sharkansky 1971). It is impossible to fully understand policy choices – and change over time – without understanding the political, social, and economic environment within which these choices are made. However, the challenges posed by this approach to understanding policy change are countered by Petry's (1999) definition of public policy, as "...government actions or positions on selected issues as indicated by legislative, executive, and judicial decisions" (542). Operationalizing choices faced but not made, and options identified but not chosen, is extremely challenging for understanding the links between public opinion and public policy, but some attempt will be made to do this in this project.

A full conception of policy making requires moving from the discussion of the nature and form of public policy to a discussion of who is involved in its making. The following section addresses the membership and composition of the policy community for this project, in order to address the "decentralized, and more or less regularized and coordinated, interactions between state and societal actors that policy making unfolds" (Skogstad 2005, 3).

Who is Involved in Policy-Making? Policy Subsectors, the Policy Community, and Decision-Makers

Public policy operates within a political, legal, and social context which includes both actors and institutions (Shafritz and Russell 1999). Howlett and Ramesh (2003) identify the whole of those involved in policy making as being members of the "policy universe" – containing "all possible international, state, and social actors and institutions directly or indirectly affecting a specific policy area" (53). The sectoral policy subsystem is drawn from the policy universe, and provides "a space where relevant actors discuss

policy issues and persuade and bargain in pursuit of their interests” (53). Others have called these policy actors and their activities the “policy community” (Pross 1986; Coleman and Skogstad 1990a and 1990b; Atkinson and Coleman 1992). Pross (1986) defines the policy community as

that part of the system that – by virtue of its functional responsibilities, its vested interests, and its specialized knowledge – acquires a dominant voice in determining government decisions in a specific field of public activity, and is generally permitted by society at large and the public authorities in particular to determine public policy in that field (98).

Relatedly, Coleman and Skogstad (1990b) define the policy community “...to include all actors or potential actors with a direct or indirect interest in a policy area of function who share a common “policy focus”, and who, with varying degrees of influence shape policy outcomes over the long run” (25). This is the definition used throughout this project.

Skogstad (2005) has emphasized this approach’s “...empirical description of the *process* of policy-making”, which adds additional nuances to the work around public opinion and public policy (56). This is equally important because it specifies the importance of process, and of the people involved who have varying amounts of influence.

There are important classifications that matter to analysis of the policy community. Coleman and Skogstad (1990a and 1990b) build on Pross’s (1986) work, speaking of the policy community as being comprised of the sub-government and the attentive public. The sub-government, which makes decisions which lead to public policy, includes government agencies, institutionalized interest associations, and other societal organizations (Pross 1986; Coleman and Skogstad 1990). The attentive public usually contains relevant media and interested and expert individuals, and “...follows and attempts to influence policy, but does not participate in policy-making on a regular basis”

(Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 26). Much of the literature on policy communities also involves a discussion of policy networks, which describe the “relationship among the particular set of actors that forms around an issue of importance to the policy community” (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 26; see also Atkinson and Coleman 1992). However, this project does not focus on the interrelationships between actors in the community – rather, the emphasis is on which actors comprise the community. Thus, the focus will remain on the policy community, rather than on networks per se.

As Howlett and Ramesh (2003) have argued, it is necessary to consider the range of actors who “...operate within a set of existing social relations and policy ideas that serve to constrain their behaviour” (16). Coleman and Skogstad (1990) follow the institutionalist tradition, arguing that it is the institutions of society that shape the values, preferences, actions, and behaviours of actors involved in the policy community. They argue that institutional characteristics, including state agencies and societal actors, “...constrain the options available to policy-makers and reinforce particular values and beliefs in the policy process” (15). Institutional analysis of the policy subsystem – the social relations, institutions, and ideas providing the context for the policy community – will be used in this project as well to assess the changes in the policy community, in the political institutions, and in public policies over time as part of the policy history.

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) define the policy subsystem as “...a space where relevant actors discuss policy issues and persuade and bargain in pursuit of their interests” (53)...which “occur in the context of various institutional arrangements surrounding the policy process” (53). There are several components to the policy subsystem which include the international system, state autonomy, and state capacity

(Howlett and Ramesh 2003). In the case of the relationship between Saskatchewan's post-secondary education financing policy and the international system, there are global pressures on Saskatchewan universities to increase enrolment both of international students and of domestic students, partly as a response to the worldwide transition to "massified" and then to "universalized" post-secondary education (Trow 2005).⁹ Additionally, financial pressures from international markets – particularly in the early to mid 1990s – are an important contextual feature when considering post-secondary education financing policy (MacKinnon 2003).

When it comes to assessing the government's autonomy and capacity, a number of factors must be included. Autonomy – or the government's "...independence from self-serving and conflicting social pressures" – can expand the range of policy actors involved and the choices available to decision-makers in a policy subsector when formulating policy (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 60; see also Coleman and Skogstad 1990a and 1990b). Capacity – reflected in "unity within and among various levels, branches, and agencies of the government and high levels of bureaucratic expertise" – is necessary for a government to move forward with decision-making and the implementation of those decisions (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 6; see also Coleman and Skogstad 1990b).

Capacity may be constrained by the ability to make coherent policies within a state's jurisdiction – or by a lack of autonomy (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Coleman and Skogstad 1990b). Canada's federal system of government may lead to constraints within the post-secondary education sector, particularly since the federal level of government

⁹ Trow (2005) argues that massified post-secondary systems are characterized by the growing participation of young people (aged 18 to 24) from 15-50% while universalized systems are characterized by participation of more than 50% of young people (aged 18 to 24) in post-secondary education,

often participates in policy-making within that sector – without strict constitutional permission to do so. The federal state becomes an important actor in the post-secondary financing sub-sector when it comes to fiscal transfers to the provinces, direct transfers to universities, and partnering arrangements in student loan programs (including bursaries and grants). However, as Montpetit (2005) notes, “...it would be unwise for the federal government to formulate public policies without the cooperation of federated governments that will eventually have the capacity, through their discretion about the implementation of such policy, to distort policy objectives” (227). Despite this assertion, he also concludes that while inter-jurisdictional cooperation may be in the jurisdictions’ best interest, “...in the end governments of jurisdictional federations normally possess the capacity to decide policy change alone in the sectors where they have jurisdiction” (227).

Further, Coleman and Skogstad (1990) conclude that if authority in a policy area is dispersed across government departments and agencies, capacity may also be diminished. Relatedly, if government actors can control access to policy making and to the policy agenda, then government may be considered to have a greater level of autonomy (Coleman and Skogstad 1990). For this particular project, there is an assumption made that decision-making capacity is held within government - particularly when it comes down to student loans. But this decision-making capacity is shared - albeit not consistently - with the universities when it comes to tuition fees.

Another key institutional element relates to the nature of the Canadian parliamentary system. Howlett and Ramesh (2003) argue that in a Westminster parliamentary system such as Canada’s, the executive branch of government – the primary decision-makers – can count on the support of the legislature in decision-making

because of strong party discipline.¹⁰ Montpetit (2005) and Savoie (2005; 1999) provide evidence of the increasing concentration of power in the centre – in the executive – at the federal level, a phenomenon that is reflected at the provincial level. McArthur (2007) has noted that provincial policy deliberations are now the domain of cabinets and their committees. Others have argued that Saskatchewan NDP governments' strong central control since the 1970s has also created an environment in which the legislature will support the executive. Under some leaders, this support is guaranteed at least in part because of the legislature's ability to provide input into decision-making (Rasmussen and Marchildon 2005; Blakeney and Borins 1999).

These elements of the institutional environment surrounding policy-making are important for understanding the context policy actors work within. As Glynn et al (2006) note,

...Our leaders need to know what sorts of policies and initiatives voters support, but a variety of other groups and individuals also need to have a working knowledge of public opinion at any given time. Interest group leaders must decide which battles to wage and how strongly their efforts will be supported by their constituents. Journalists, who are key players in the measurement and communication of public opinion, need to know what their readers and viewers want to hear about, but they also survey the political landscape for those of us who are curious about the attitudes of our fellow citizens. Even corporate executives must keep "their ears to the ground" to understand trends in American culture – what consumers think about, what they purchase, and generally, how they choose to live (3).

Atkinson and Coleman (1992) emphasize the importance of changes in the environment for membership in the policy community. They note that "...environmental disturbances are quite capable of crushing networks and dispersing communities" (175). However, if members of the community have sufficient arrangements so that they are able to manage

¹⁰ Howlett and Ramesh (2003) also note that some state' capacity and autonomy – and policy subsystems – are impacted by the judiciary. In this research project, the judiciary does not have a discernible role.

those changes, they are less likely to be impacted (Atkinson and Coleman 1992; Skogstad 2005).

Identifying the composition of the policy community for university student financing in Saskatchewan is key to understanding the voices present in – and absent from – the policy discussion. Policy actors may include individuals, groups, classes, and states involved in the policy process who work to further their own interests but are influenced by institutional factors (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). These institutional factors may include the nature and structure of the policy community itself: the actors within the community may be less or more integrated “...by developing a set of shared values, norms, and beliefs which shape the networks that emerge and, ultimately, the policy outcomes in the given sector”(Coleman and Skogstad 1990b, 29). As Skogstad (2005) later noted, what constitutes appropriate goals and policy instruments, as well as rules of conduct, become institutionalized as part of the policy community’s framework.

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) argue that there are important groups of actors in the policy community: state actors who are either elected or appointed officials; societal structures and actors that include political/economic structures, business actors, and labour; and political structures and actors that include the public, think-tanks and research organizations, political parties, mass media, and interest groups. Following both Pross (1986) and Skogstad (2005), the groups of actors present in the policy community are divided into the sub-government and attentive public. The sub-government includes state actors (elected or appointed) and interest groups such as students’ unions and universities (see also Atkinson and Coleman 1992). The attentive public is understood to include research organizations and think-tanks - including public opinion researchers, the mass

media, the public, and political parties. While Howlett and Ramesh (2003) include research organizations and the mass media in the principle policy community, they will be considered part of the attentive public for the majority of this project's timeline. It is important to note that policy communities are not fixed over time: many conceive of them as "organic" (Atkinson and Coleman 1992, 159), implying that they are capable of change due to both external and internal factors over time. Table 2.1 reflects the policy community membership from 1991 to 2004.

Table 2.1: Policy Community Membership

<p>Attentive Public</p>	<p>Public</p> <p>Researchers, including public opinion researchers</p> <p>Think-tanks</p> <p>Mass media</p> <p>Political parties (NA for this project)</p>
<p>Sub-government</p>	<p>Elected officials</p> <p>Civil service, including deputy ministers, associate/assistant deputies, executive directors, directors</p> <p>Interest groups, including university presidents and student union representatives</p>

Source: Adapted from Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh, *Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems. Second Edition.* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Sub-Government: State Actors – Elected Officials

Elected officials may be members of the executive (cabinet) or of the legislative assembly (legislature). The executive or the cabinet is considered the main decision-making body, which has the ultimate “authority to make and implement policies” (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 65). These executive decision-makers may be defined as “...one individual or group of individuals who make explicit or implicit single decisions or groups of decisions which may set out directives for guiding future decisions, initiate or retard action, or guide implementation of previous decisions” (Carley 1980, 46). While members of the executive and of the legislature are both important in terms of policy making, it is important to distinguish between them because of the greater level of decision-making power present in the executive (Cohn 2007; Rasmussen and Marchildon 2005; McNutt 2006).

The executive controls information (including commissioning and considering public opinion research and interacting with the media), fiscal resources, has support from the civil service, can influence and be influenced by interest groups and think tanks, and can control the legislative agenda (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Rasmussen and Marchildon 2005; Savoie 2005). In addition, Westminster parliamentary systems like Canada’s tend to insulate members of cabinet from the public (Petry 2007; Page 2006).

In Saskatchewan, which has a tradition of an institutionalized cabinet, there is “...greater collective decision making and power sharing as regards departmental policy” (Dunn 1995, 276). Since the 1940s, Saskatchewan has had a tradition of rationalized decision-making processes, including budget preparation and departmental – as well as whole of government – planning (Dunn 1995; Rasmussen and Marchildon 2005). Under

Premier Romanow (1991 to 2001), cabinet committee matters were subject to a final vote by full cabinet. This led to “...greater cabinet identification with, and ultimate support of, the major decisions of government”, strengthening collective decision-making (Rasmussen and Marchildon 2005, 200). These processes remained in place during the coalition government of 1999 to 2001. Under Premier Calvert (2001 to 2007), formal changes were made to the planning structures of government, but not to the collective decision-making processes.

However, despite the powers of the executive to make decisions, there are environmental forces that can limit this power. These forces include the power of societal (voter) demands, limits to organizational capacity, and the limits in expertise of elected officials (Dunn 1995; Blakeney and Borins 1999; Savoie 2005). Despite these limitations, decision makers – or elected officials – are set apart from other members of the policy community by their ability to make the final decisions about policy action or inaction and policy content.

Sub-Government: State Actors – Government and Opposition Members of the Legislature

Members of the legislature play a vital role in addressing problems and solutions within the legislative forum (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). They may influence changes in policies, while also addressing issues associated with implementation. This may occur in different ways: through the discussions occurring within the governing party’s caucus, through discussions in committees, through open discussions in the Legislative Assembly, and through issues raised by the opposition party(ies) within the Legislative Assembly. When party discipline is strong, opposition members are more likely to be the

ones raising contrasting views and making demands for change. During coalition government situations such as the one in Saskatchewan in 1999-2001, it is also anticipated that potential dissent between parties in the coalition would be addressed within the executive, rather than on the floor of the Legislative Assembly. Overall, Howlett and Ramesh (2003) conclude that

...While individual legislators, on the basis of their expertise or special interest in a particular issue, can be included in a policy subsystem, legislatures as a whole are not very significant actors in the making or implementing of public policies (67).

Sub-Government: The Civil Service

Appointed officials – or the civil service or bureaucracy – serve the executive, but are also considered the “central figures in many policy subsystems” (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 68). In terms of the policy process, the civil service’s power comes through six main sources: its legally-assigned functions, its ability to access resources, its wide range of skills, abilities, and knowledge; its access to information; its permanence and length of tenure; and its control over policy discussions (Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

To be strong, a bureaucracy must have a clear mandate, a professional ethos, and enjoy strong support, but not interference from politicians in its day-to-day activities. Close ties with client groups are also to be avoided if a bureaucracy is to be effective. An ability to generate and process its own information is also important if reliance on interest groups is to be avoided (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 68).

McArthur (2007) has argued that analysis undertaken by the civil service became increasingly important by the mid-1990s, “...in response to increasingly severe budget crises” like the one facing Saskatchewan that nearly resulted in financial receivership (251).

However, despite the importance of the civil service, it is also important to recognize its potential limitations in the policy process and in the policy community. First, the executive is ultimately responsible for decision-making, even though the civil service provides information to support that decision-making. Second, if there is a gap between the policy desires of the executive and the advice provided by the civil service, the civil service is less likely to be effective. Third, cleavages within the civil service itself may limit its overall influence – particularly within the policy process (Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

McArthur (2007) notes that it is important to distinguish between the federal and provincial approaches to policy making as well. In a provincial system, particularly in a small province like Saskatchewan, McArthur argues that there is a greater likelihood of conflict between elected and appointed officials for two reasons. First, the political executive is unlikely to recognize the importance of policy expertise provided by appointed officials. Second, there is a greater level of contact between policy experts within the civil service and the political executive because of the size of the civil service, facilitating “less formalized and more intense” contact (McArthur 2007, 241). Thus,

...those with policy knowledge are known by the minister to be working on particular issues, are called upon frequently to provide information and advice, and have relatively frequent contact with the minister (McArthur 2007, 241).

Sub-Government: Interest Groups

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) argue that societal structures and actors – encompassing all interest groups in society – are a key element of the policy subsystem. Supportive interest groups are needed for successful policy-making, and competition among the key groups makes that support more difficult to attain. Coleman and Skogstad

(1990) argue that interest groups tend to have two main roles in a policy community: policy advocacy and policy participation. Policy advocacy requires lobbying of the state by the group(s), while participation involves lobbying plus formal internal structures and a “distinct identity as an organization” (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 20-1). Particularly, a group must be able to come up with positions on sophisticated questions and must be “...sufficiently autonomous from members to be able to transcend their short-term interests...” (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 21; see also Klijn 2005). This distinction between short-term and long-term interests is an important one, particularly when members and leaders are often in transition.

Scharpf (1994) argues that achieving cooperation among divided interest groups is often impossible. As Montpetit (2005) notes, “Uncertain of the motivations of their peers, interest groups that have neither a shared identity nor any shared interest often choose not to cooperate” (233). Conflict among those groups with different goals in the policy community seems to be inevitable (Skogstad 2005). The interdependence of groups can also have an impact on their participation in the policy community. Skogstad (2005) emphasizes this point by noting that “...networks in which actors are mutually dependent on the resources of one another to realize their objectives would then have a different mode of behaviour and different consequences for policy-making than those in which resources are unevenly distributed” (5). Students’ union operations are dependent on the universities’ transfer of student fees to them, while universities depend on both tuition fees and government operating grants in order to function. These interdependencies are important to acknowledge within this policy community

Interest groups bring knowledge – particular to their organization, and often about their membership – to the policy community. This information is key for elected and appointed officials in the policy making process (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). In fact, many interest groups have taken on some of the traditional roles of research organizations – commissioning and undertaking their own research for use in influencing the policy process. Interest groups also donate funds to political parties and individual politicians, or may endorse particular campaigns or individuals who are in line with their perception of appropriate policy directions.

Not all groups have an equal impact on the policy process, or are considered equal within the policy community because of differences in available funding, access to elected (and appointed) officials, and membership size (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Coleman and Skogstad 1990). Relatedly, Phillips (2007) argues that “...institutional contexts reward certain [policy] styles by taking the political actors and their positions more seriously and by granting greater access to the policy process and more influence over policy outcomes” (501).

While many argue that business and labour are the key interests within society (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Coleman and Skogstad 1990), for the purposes of this project the interest groups representing key subsections of the public – the formal students’ unions (including national and university-specific representation) at both universities and senior administration at the educational institutions – themselves are vital for the discussion. In the Saskatchewan context – with a small, tightly-knit policy community – interest group representatives have an important role. As the current University of Regina Board of Governors’ Chair Mo Bundon notes,

...Here, the university president is in direct contact with government ministers, understands the political situation, and is probably on boards, such as the Regina Regional Economic Development Authority. The university president is a special person here and that person can influence social, community, and economic events in this province (U of R Report 2008, 4).

Attentive Public: The Public

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) do not include the public as members of the policy community per se, arguing that "...in most liberal democratic states policy decisions are taken by representative institutions that empower specialized actors to determine the scope and content of public policies, rather than the public per se determining policy (74). However, despite the perceived lack of a direct role in the policy community, Howlett and Ramesh – along with others – argue that the public is important for policy making:

... rather than directly affecting public policy-making in specific sectors, generalized public opinion – the policy mood or policy sentiment of a population at a particular time – makes up one element of the background conditions or environment in which the policy process unfolds (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 77).

The public may be considered part of the interested, engaged, or affected public that surrounds and is focused on the work of policy making.

Others argue that the role of the public has increased within the policy community, in part because of rising expectations (Skogstad 2003). Phillips (2007) proposes that the public now places greater demands both on governments and on interest groups in policy-making (see also Laforest and Orsini 2005). She argues that "a well-informed public that has widespread access to informational technologies, less deference to authorities, and reduced trust in government [creates rising expectations] that governments will do what works and will demonstrate results (502). However, as

Montpetit (2003) notes, citizens' opinions are "...often shaped by widely diffused impressions that rarely accurately reflect the actual situation in a sector" (11).

In addition, McArthur (2007) argues that the size of the provincial policy community also facilitates a greater relationship between political officials and members of the public impacted by particular policies. He notes that

...The processes that engage policy advisors, ministers, and the affected public are thus much more likely to be based on shared information in forums in which there is a lesser degree of differentiation of these key actors in terms of policy knowledge and understanding (241).

Because of the public's interest in public policy, both elected and appointed officials engage in the "selling" of policies. In these cases, "officials cite polls publicly to demonstrate that citizens support their policies" (Page 2006, 5). As Page further notes, "Much more frequently, opinion research is used to inform governments' communications strategy and tactics, which often resemble the marketing of products and services to customers" (5).

Although the general public is not normally considered a member of the policy community, most scholars will agree that the public – and public opinion – can have a tremendous impact on policy making through its environmental and political influences (Skogstad 2005). A more detailed exploration of the public, its role in policy making, and the potential connections between public opinion and public policy will take place in Section 2.7.

Think-Tanks and Research Organizations

Researchers working at universities, research institutes, and think-tanks can have an impact on particular policy issues as part of the policy community. As independent

“outsiders” or “experts”, these organizations may impact policy formation through contributions to agenda setting, shaping problem definitions, and providing advice on solutions to decision-makers by conducting research and communicating expertise to governments and providing forums for discussion (Abelson 2002; Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Lindquist 1993). Abelson (2002) notes that “...at times several Canadian think tanks have contributed both to policy-making and to shaping the policy- or decision-making environment” (5).

In the case of post-secondary education financing in Saskatchewan, think tanks and research institutes were virtually non-existent in this particular policy community until the twenty-first century – when organizations like the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF), an agency created by the federal government, and the Educational Policy Institute (EPI), a private organization, began publishing research on participation in post-secondary education. Gaining a presence post 2000, these organizations focused on post-secondary education did not take a solely provincial focus: rather, they emphasized multi-province work or focused on particular groups such as aboriginal people or people with disabilities. However, despite the apparent lack of “autonomous” research underway, several of the interest groups involved in the policy community – student organizations and university administrations – were conducting and disseminating their own research to influence the policy process.

However, if one goes further than the traditional definitions of think-tanks and research institutes to also include public opinion research firms – and pollsters – then an additional group of people can be added to the discussion. In the Saskatchewan context, public opinion polling undertaken for government since the early 1990s has been

conducted largely by Saskatchewan-based firms as the procurement policy has favoured organizations with a base in the province. As might be expected with the growing interest in public opinion research throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the number of firms – as well as the breadth of their expertise – grew throughout that time period. The Saskatchewan environment contains both firms with traditional connections to political parties – and to various governments – but also firms that have worked with parties and organizations of various ideologies.

As will be noted in Chapters 3 and 4, public opinion research on post-secondary education access and affordability was limited in the early 1990s and education was not a pressing concern for most of the early public opinion polling commissioned by government. As the 1990s continued on, interest in education – and in gathering opinions about education – grew. Thus, government-commissioned firms included questions on public opinion toward education throughout the mid to late 1990s and into the twenty-first century. In addition, Saskatchewan interest groups – particularly the students' unions – began to include references to public opinion in their communications with government during elections and into the first years of the new century. More and more information on public opinion around post-secondary education became prominent in the Canadian context as this time period evolved (see for example the opinion work done in Ontario by Livingstone, Hart and Davie throughout the project time period).

Political Parties

Howlett and Ramesh (2003) argue that parties have had a significant impact on public policy, but only *indirectly* through their influence on elections and electoral

outcomes and through their staffing of the executive. Thus, parties do not play a significant role in the direct creation of public policy as members of the policy community. It is also not always clear whether political parties' election platforms clearly reflect the will of their members, and election platforms may not provide more than an initial guide to policy-making for newly elected officials. Cross (2007) argues that

...Canada's political parties are not effective vehicles for policy study and development. They neither offer voters meaningful opportunity for involvement in the policy-making process nor do they regularly generate policy alternatives for consideration and examination by those in elected office or in the senior bureaucracy (425).

Further, Cross notes that "Governments almost never turn to their party when seeking serious policy advice; instead, they appoint independent or royal commissions" (438).

Courtney (2004) suggests that the major goal of political parties is to win office and form government, but that "...the best that the great majority of political parties can hope for is to gain sufficient support to influence the political agenda and public policy" (6).

There may be a connection between political parties and interest groups, however. In this Saskatchewan case, there has been a connection between many individual interest group representatives and particular political parties. This reflects comments made by Robert Young (1991), who has noted that "...people with genuine policy concerns seek out interest groups to advance their causes..." rather than seeking out political parties (77). Additionally, there is a connection between interest group membership (particularly among individual representatives) and staffing of the executive, which may strengthen the informal or indirect role of parties in policy-making.

Mass Media

Whether to include the mass media as a policy community insider or outside observer and commentator has been debated in both the public policy and policy community literature. Usually considered “outsiders” because of the tradition of journalistic autonomy, members of the mass media are expected to research, comment on, interpret, and discuss public policy without having a direct role in policy-making (Murray 2007). While members of the media may provide evidence in inquiries, most do not intervene directly in policy debates by providing specific options (Murray 2007).

The debate around the media’s role in public policy is complicated by the common approach to the “media” as a homogenous, coherent whole – rather than as a collective of individual professionals. Murray (2007) has argued that this approach is problematic for the study of public policy formation (see also Godfrey 1991). Rather, she notes that

...as institutions and actors at the meso- and micro-levels of the policy system, the media are apparently disaggregated and uncoordinated, negotiating highly differential access to the policy sphere depending on personal political capital, economic constraints of ownership, and the news culture within each organization (Murray 2007, 525).

This concern underpins the decision of researchers such as Susan Herbst to talk about “journalists” rather than the mass media (see also Glynn et al 2006).

Although in many respects peripheral to the policy community, the mass media has a series of roles to play in its part as policy actor, throughout the policy process. First, the media acts as an information source – providing policy-related research and information for both the informed and uninformed publics (Godfrey 1991; Murray 2007). This is done through a combination of emotion and analysis – emotion to attract the

attention of the public, and analysis to respond to the emotion (Godfrey 1991; Alboim 2001). Second, the media can also exaggerate knowledge gaps. It often serves to reinforce existing knowledge – primarily because those with knowledge are more likely to seek out additional information. Research shows that as the information flow into a social system increases, groups with higher socio-economic status acquire the information at a faster rate than lower-status groups which widens the knowledge gap between them (LeHeron and Sligo 2005; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien 1970).

Third, the media can privilege certain perspectives, based on who they interview and what information they include in their reporting. Murray (2007) notes that the media chooses first to go to government; then to independent research groups, institutes, and foundations; then to independent academics; and finally to public or interest groups when following developments in public policy. Finally, some have argued that the media can also be an active participant in the policy discussion (Godfrey 1991).

However, these roles may make the communications between members of the policy community – including elected officials, bureaucrats, interest groups, and the attentive public – more complicated and less effective than they might otherwise be.

Glynn et al (2006) argue that

...Journalists, for example, can often, either knowingly or unknowingly, distort public opinion through their reports, so policymakers find it difficult to figure out whos voices they are listening to – those of media professionals or average citizens. Alternately, journalists can misrepresent or fail to cover aspects of a policy debate, and that can affect the ways that the public responds to legislative endeavours” (7).

Additional challenges facing the role of the media in particular policy communities are linked to turnover in provincial press galleries, which has been identified as higher than in the House of Commons’ gallery (Murray 2007). Murray (2007) notes that as a result

of this turnover, “the journalist-politician link or journalist-public servant link in Canadian policy networks is thus a weak, contingent one, under constant negotiation” (528). However, despite this weak link, in a small province like Saskatchewan, one would expect that despite the turnover in the press gallery, connections between members of the media and politicians and bureaucrats would not take a tremendous amount of time to rebuild.

While not considering them highly influential actors, Howlett and Ramesh (2003) conclude that the mass media occupy a “...position that allows for significant influence on the preferences of government and society in regard to the identification of public problems and their solutions” (82). Some have noted the importance of the media’s influence on the public by arguing that “...once the public has been aroused and educated [by the media], it is clear that they can have an enormous impact on politicians and policy...” (Godfrey 1991, 97).

Political System

Understanding how public policy is conceptualized leads to questions about how public policy is made. This project frames policy-making – and decision-making – as a series of processes that take place within a political system. Easton’s (1981) theory of the political system is premised on the understanding that “...political life is a system of behavior and institutions” (303; see also Easton 1965).

The political system contains inputs and outputs, which are connected in a ‘feedback loop’. Within the system, citizens, interest groups, the mass media, and government officials (both elected and appointed) communicate about public policy.

Elected officials make decisions, everyone else responds to these decisions (positively or negatively), and both elected and appointed officials respond to those responses (see Page 2006, 13).

Citizens' expressions of opinion are particularly important in Easton's model of the political system. Expressed both through elections and public opinion research, citizens' opinions play an important role in the feedback loop. Page (2006) argues that the public can issue demands and extend support to decision makers. In particular, "...[public opinion] can inform government officials about citizens' opinions and reactions to policies and thereby influence decisions about how resources are allocated" (Page 2006, 14).

In a political system, gaining and maintaining public support is immensely important. Specific government actions may gain or undermine this support. Thus, Page (2006) has noted that "...opinion research can help to guide activities by governments which aim to promote the acceptance and legitimacy of their policies" (14). Additional citizen inputs in the political system come from elections. As Courtney (2004) notes,

Elections are, in a sense, the linchpins of the political process, linking government to the public pressures expressed by citizens, parties, interest groups, and social movements. Elections are also the basic mechanism holding a government accountable for its policies and actions (5).

The political system – populated by members of the policy community, discussed in the next section – contains competition between those wishing to provide input into policy making. Influenced by Easton, Howlett and Ramesh (2003) conceptualize the policy subsystem as

...a space where relevant actors discuss policy issues and persuade and bargain in pursuit of their interests. During the course of their interaction with the other actors, they often give up or modify their objectives in return for concessions from others.

These interactions, however, occur in the context of various institutional arrangements surrounding the policy process, which affect how the actors pursue their interests and ideas and the extent to which their efforts succeed (53).

Many researchers now argue that it is vital to come back to the notion of inputs and outputs, and to concentrate on assessing policy “outputs”, versus the “outcomes” that have become part of twenty-first century discourse in order to understand public policy decisions and what governments “produce” (Montpetit 2003; Page 2006). As Montpetit (2003) argues, the “...concept of policy outputs refers to the products of political institutions – namely policy inaction or policy actions that generally apply to a sector – whereas policy outcomes refer to the impact of those actions or inactions on the sector” (12).

The concept of policy community is clearly connected to that of the political system. In particular, Skogstad (2005) speaks of the role the policy community can play in validating the outputs of the political system. She notes that when public policy and other outputs “meet social standards of acceptability and appropriateness”, political authority will be recognized as legitimate. Further, she argues that members of the policy community can enhance input legitimacy – the acceptability of decision-making processes – “...by virtue of their incorporation of representatives of ‘the public’ directly into policy formulation or implementation” (Skogstad 2005, 13; see also Skogstad 2003). If citizens’ opinions are included in decision-making, then the processes are more likely to be seen as legitimate. The inputs from citizens, interest groups, and the public – among others – must be reflected in both decision-making processes and system outputs in order to ensure complete legitimacy in public policy making. Hence, there is an inherent connection between public opinion and public policy within a political system.

How Policy is Made: the Public Policy Cycle

Public policy-making can be understood to involve a series of processes that take place in different stages as part of an iterative cycle (Lasswell 1956; Jones 1984; Anderson 1984; Howlett and Ramesh 2003). These steps do not necessarily follow in a linear pattern, but most public policy will have gone through all five stages in its creation. The stages are commonly considered to include agenda-setting, problem definition, policy design/formulation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Shafritz and Russell 1999; Pal 2006; Brooks and Miljan 2003).

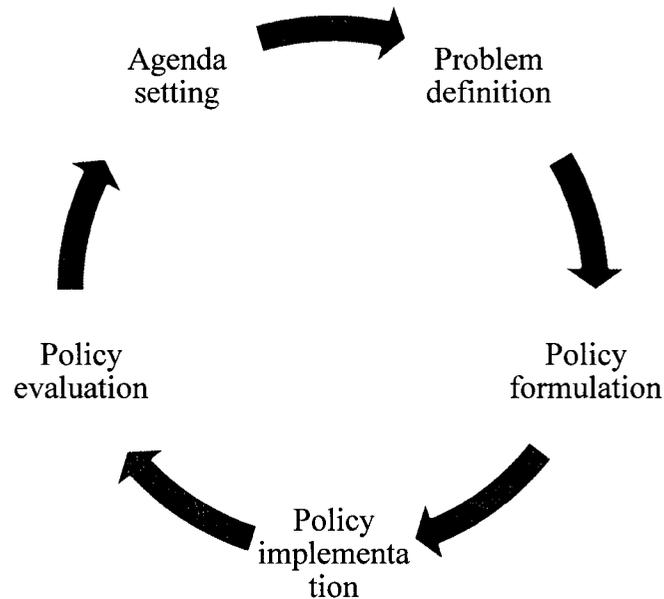


Figure 2.1: The Policy Cycle, adapted from Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh, *Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems. Second Edition.* (Oxford University Press, 2003); and Stephen Brooks and Lydia Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada: An Introduction. Fourth Edition.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

In the detailed discussion of each stage that follows below, the particular activities – and in some cases, actors and environmental factors – involved will be presented and evaluated. This social, economic, and political context is vital to understanding the

policy making process. Howlett and Ramesh (2003) argue that “the context of societal, state, and international institutions and the values these institutions embody condition how a problem is defined, facilitate the adoption of certain solutions to it, and prohibit or inhibit the choice of other solutions” (16).

Part of the context to be discussed, both here and in Chapter 4’s discussion of the Saskatchewan policy history, is the timing of the policy process. The timing of the policy cycle must be understood as related to external pressures – particularly within the context of the electoral cycle. Traditionally, when a new government is elected it is unlikely to develop much new policy within its first year. Between years one and two it is likely to act on election promises. Following year two, a government is likely to consider and implement major changes in policy. However, after year three (particularly among those governments with fixed election dates) the focus is likely to shift away from controversial problems toward election preparedness (Lindbeck 1979; Reid 1998; Petterssen-Lidbom 2003).

While the interaction between the electoral cycle and the policy process has been assessed in various countries, some scholars have argued that in fact the electoral cycle alone does not consistently impact the policy process within Canada in all policy areas. For example, Serletis and Afxentiou (1998) conclude that electoral cycles have not had an impact on economic policy in Canada between 1926 and 1994 – in part because they find no regularized political cycles per se. Despite this apparent contradiction, this research project will examine policy changes situated within the context of the electoral cycle because of the focus on policy actors.

Agenda Setting

Agenda setting can be defined as “...the process whereby collective problems also become understood as political problems – that is, problems of concern to governments” (Montpetit 2003, 38). Understanding how – and why – a policy problem becomes part of the government’s focus is a key part of understanding how public policy is made (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). As Brooks and Miljan (2003) note, the “...political agenda is not an inevitable product of social and economic conditions” – thus, it is vital to explore why some conditions become formulated as problems and others do not” (7).

When discussing agenda setting, it is important to be clear about whose agenda is the focus. Brooks and Miljan (2003) define a general societal agenda – the overarching political agenda – as “...defining what is relevant in public life, how issues are defined, whose views should be taken seriously, and what sort of ‘solutions’ are tenable” (7). The political agenda – also referred to as the governmental or policy agenda – signifies the first process in the multi-stage policy making model. There is also a public agenda, which is often identified through the “most important problem” question in public opinion polling (Soroka 2003). A further agenda may be that of the mass media – the media agenda (Soroka 2003). These agendas may coincide, or they may conflict – but this project involves all three. The focus for the next few paragraphs will be on the policy agenda.

There are a number of factors – both internal and external to government – that can account for the transfer of an issue to the policy agenda. First, governments may respond to a social or economic event (or crisis), whether domestic or international. Social or economic failures, such as changes in social structures, can have an impact

(Neiman 2000). Technological changes, such as the introduction/expansion of cell phone technology or social networking software, may also have an impact on the public agenda (Neiman 2000). Social shifts like demographic changes (e.g. increase in Aboriginal population) or urban-rural shifts can result in issues being raised to the agenda level (Neiman 2000; Nagel 2002).

Second, an event or issue may become a symbol that requires government to respond (Kingdon 2005; Soroka 2003). This may be particularly important depending on the electoral cycle. If government is coming up to an election, it may face heightened pressure. Third, the public's attention may be focused on an issue through interest group work or through the media (Kingdon 2005; Soroka 2003; Takeshita 2006). New political forces – like the creation and mobilization of interest groups – can impact what issues become part of the government's policy agenda (Soroka 2003). If the new force is particularly effective, particularly in combination with partisan timing, it may be very successful in influencing the government's agenda. Fourth, an election, changes in an administration, and public opinion shifts may serve to focus attention on a particular issue or issues (Kingdon 2005). Fifth, if other jurisdictions are paying attention to an issue, it may gain prominence among those who are not (Kingdon 2005).

In order to understand the agenda-setting process, the influence of the media, of interest groups, and of the public (and their respective agendas), must be considered. Kingdon (1995) focuses on interest groups (as policy entrepreneurs) and argues that the agenda setting process is a competitive one, in which interests work to gain the attention of the media, the public, and policy elites. Brooks and Miljan (2003) reiterate this argument in noting that “political issues and policy problems are constructed out of the

conflicting values and terminologies that different groups put forward when they compete for something that cannot be shared so as to satisfy them all fully” (7).

However, others have argued that the media has a tremendous role to play in terms of defining both what issues become part of the public agenda and how those issues are defined (Alboim 2001; Murray 2007; Shafritz and Russell 1999). As many have argued, for most major public issues, most of the public begins to pay them more heed after they have been reported in newspapers, on television, or on radio call-in shows. Thus, if the media provides coverage of issues that journalists define as compelling – or vital to the public interest – the public is more likely to be both aware of and interested in these issues. There are also cases when journalists “discover” issues already on the public agenda, but serve to publicise these and potentially further the debate around them.

Others have noted that the media serves to publicize the “cases” presented by organized interests/advocacy groups who are trying to influence the public agenda (Shafritz and Russell 1999). Much information that is used by journalists comes from “experts” – often from interest/advocacy groups – that are considered to be well-established in particular policy areas. If there is conflict around these issues, so much the better – much media presentation focuses on contentious issues (Godfrey 1991; Alboim 2001).

Overall, the media has an important role in agenda setting, through its focus on particular issues. As Bernard Cohen (1963) has famously argued, “...the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (13). Additionally, the media is

successful in “priming” the debate by drawing greater attention to some aspects of an issue at the expense of others.

Many researchers have pointed to the important role of public opinion in the agenda setting phase of policy making (Soroka 2003; Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Kingdon 1995). Page (2006) argues that public opinion research – particularly polling – has a greater impact on agenda-setting within the public policy making cycle rather than on government responsiveness overall (see discussion on page 4). Researchers argue that decision-makers are more likely to be influenced by public opinion during the agenda-setting phase when opinion is strongly expressed in one direction, it is cohesive and salient, and there have been dramatic shifts (Glynn et al 2006; Bourdieu 1979).

Problem Definition

How problems are described and discussed is an important part of defining the policy agenda. Policy problems do not exist outside of the words, symbolism, and rhetoric used to describe them (Brooks and Miljan 2003). Defining the policy problem – its wording, parameters, causal relationships, complexity, and severity – is a key activity for all members of the policy community (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Brooks and Miljan 2003; Pal 2006). It not only helps to define alternative options, it helps to drive policy analysis, implementation, and evaluation. If a problem is defined as serious – or even as a crisis – it is more likely to maintain its place on the government’s agenda. If it is considered a new problem, it is less likely that members of the policy community will agree on the parameters of the problem.

Part of the problem definition process includes the definition of who is (most) affected by the problem. These “problem populations” are also constructed throughout this process: they may be seen as deserving or undeserving, they may be held responsible for their own problem (“it’s their own fault”), they may be either familiar or strange, and they may be sympathetic or threatening (Schneider and Ingram 2005). Schneider and Ingram (1993; 2005) argue that there are four types of socially constructed target populations: 1) “advantaged” groups that are powerful and positively constructed; 2) “contenders” who are powerful but negatively constructed; 3) “dependents” who are considered weak, but are positively constructed; and 4) “deviants” who are weak and negatively constructed.

How the problem is defined clearly has implications for how the problem is addressed. If causes are difficult to address – for political, economic, or social reasons – solutions become less clear. Most policy problems are in fact clusters of problems, and the problems in Saskatchewan’s post-secondary education financing area are no less complex. This project shows an evolution in problem definition in this policy area over time, which will be further explored in Chapter 4. Additionally, the severity of the problem, its parameters, and the potential role for government in addressing the problem are all reflected both in the problem definition process and in the range of solutions to be considered in the policy formulation stage. Defining a problem in a particular way will have an undeniable impact on how the problem may be addressed.

The definition process itself is heavily influenced both by external social/political/economic factors such as cultural values and events and by actions taken within the policy community, such as interest group advocacy, elite information

including both professional advice from within government and expert advice from without. Because of this range of inputs, it is possible that the policy community itself may not agree that there *is* a problem, let alone agreeing on the nature, causes, and solutions to the problem.

Policy Formulation

Policy formulation involves determining a range of options available to solve the identified problem(s), which may come out of the agenda setting process or may be developed after the problem is on the agenda (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). As Brooks and Miljan (2003) note, there are a number of elements at work in this phase:

[the] selection of means is influenced by how things have been done in the past – by vested bureaucratic, political, and societal institutions; by chance, including the individuals involved in a decision; and by ideas and beliefs that may or may not be well founded. Means sometimes precede and determine the ends of a policy over the convenience and preferences of state authorities (13).

Formulation is not a linear, orderly process: rather, it is complex and iterative. It includes members of the policy community, but may also include information gathered from the public – used in part to identify the acceptable range of options. Other organizations and/or institutions like foundations, research organizations (such as the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation), and researchers not typically part of the policy community may also be involved in this stage of policy making. Other layers of government – in this case, the federal government – may also help to establish parameters around what is possible because of their occasional targeted involvement. Defining the qualifications of the participants at this stage is particularly important – both for the

quality of the results and for public perception around the range of possibilities being considered.

The content of public policy – including approach and instruments used – is an important part of the discussion around policy formulation. There are parameters placed around policy making, based both on internal and external factors. The range of options for policy choices is determined at least in part on what is considered to be politically feasible, what is financially possible, and what is in line with previous decisions. Peters and van Nispen (1998) argue that students of instrument choice must also remember that policy instruments are political, and that politics is as important – maybe even more important – than the economic rationale for choosing an instrument. Further, they argue that it is important to assess the impact of instruments operating simultaneously as well as acknowledging the symbolic impact of instrument choice: “They can also be seen as having a strong symbolic element that tells the population what government is thinking (pardon the reification) and what its collective perceptions of problems and the public may be” (Peters and van Nispen 1998, 3).

Despite the range of policy instruments available, Bressers (1998) notes that “different policy fields tend to show a preference for their own ‘favourite’ types of policy instruments and use these repeatedly regardless of their actual contribution to reducing the problems in specific fields” (85). In the context of student-focused university funding, the Saskatchewan government has made extensive use of two categories of instruments between 1991 and 2004: voluntary and mixed instruments.

Voluntary instruments include those goods and services provided by families and communities, whether incited by government directly or indirectly through inaction

(Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Howlett 2005). These instruments do not require government expenditure and are culturally acceptable in the era of neo-liberalism, but are often considered unable to address complex problems and do not address the reality that many in society do not have families and communities to support them (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). In this project, these instruments are understood to include the support provided to university students by parents, families, and communities through direct funds and community-based bursaries/grants and employment support.

Mixed instruments include both 1) subsidies and 2) taxes and user charges. First, subsidies include various forms of financial transfers to individuals, firms, and organizations under government direction, including bursaries, grants, tax incentives, and loans (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Howlett 2005). Transfers are designed to reward (and incent) particular kinds of activities, positively impacting actors' perceptions of benefits while reducing their perceptions of costs. In the Saskatchewan context, these include bursaries and grants, tax credits, and loans designed for individual students. Additionally, they include operating and capital grants provided to universities directly by government. These types of instruments are flexible, allow quick response, tend to prevent interest groups from interfering with the foundational values for the programs by focusing attention on incremental program/policy "improvements" rather than on renegotiating completely new policies, and might cost less than other approaches.

However, governments have found that while subsidies might be more acceptable than other types of incentive, as the amount of take-up increases these become more difficult to maintain. Although designed to work as an incentive, the subsidies and grants to individuals do not always work in the same way for all people (Howlett and Ramesh

2003; Usher 2006a and 2006b; Finnie and Schwartz 1995). Additionally, many have argued that this approach is inefficient because it acts as an incentive to those who may already be taking advantage of an activity – like those already participating in post-secondary education (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Finnie 2005). Creating these types of incentives can be politically difficult and will certainly compete with other requests for funding, while governments have found that once they are established they are very difficult to eliminate (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Howlett 2005). This is particularly evident when it comes to grants for university education, which must be considered to be a trade-off when compared with other forms of social and economic spending.

The second type of mixed instrument used by the Saskatchewan government in this case includes both taxes and user charges. User charges – in this case, tuition fees for university education – occur “where the government imposes a price on certain behaviours which those undertaking them must pay” (Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 111). User charges are easy to establish, but may reduce both “desirable” and “undesirable” activity. In this context, the undesirable activity may be participating in post-secondary education unnecessarily or in an unfocused way, or by participating in the “wrong kind” of post-secondary education. However, it may also discourage people from participating because they consider the price to be too high. Thus, it is necessary to ensure that enough research is done to ensure that the price provides the necessary financial support without unnecessarily discouraging consumption.

Policy formulation results in winners and losers. Although there are often appeal points for losers – whether through the policy community, through mobilization, or through the media – it is unlikely that the policy community will stand united behind the

eventual policy decision. Carley (1980) points to the varying implications of policy decisions, depending in part on the actors involved. Politicians and bureaucrats are likely to perceive means differently. Since most policy objectives can be achieved through a variety of means, it is unlikely that all will agree on the most appropriate method.

Carley (1980) argues that there is a role for the public in policy formulation. In particular, “if objective data is obtained, value judgements of politicians and experts are applied to it, yet no policy decision can be made, it becomes necessary to consult the public, or at least some segment of it” (80).

Implementation

Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) define policy implementation as “a process of interaction between the setting of goals and actions geared to achieving them” (x). Most agree that there is not one best approach to implementation. Rather, it must reflect particular circumstances and the actors involved. While many approaches to public policy separate the implementation and evaluation stages of policy making in terms of the actors involved, this project does not do so. Rather, this approach understands the challenges and supports available for implementation as those that are established early on in the policy cycle.

Many decisions must still be made at the implementation stage. Members of the policy community may be involved in terms of assessing how best to implement the chosen policy direction, and public opinion may serve to inform the processes involved in implementation.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a vital part of the policy making cycle, involving "...the systematic examination of activities undertaken by a government to make a determination about their effects, both for the short term and the long range" (Shafritz and Russell 1999, 56). The evaluative techniques used may vary from time to time and from program/policy to program/policy. There may be multiple evaluations going on at any given time: formal evaluations may be undertaken by government, either directly or indirectly through contracting, while concurrent evaluative work is being done by advocacy groups or think tanks, for example.

An important part of evaluation may involve members of the policy community. Equally important, however, are those who are the subjects of the policy or program – those whose voices may not have been heard earlier in the policy process. Evaluation should be designed to reflect those voices, despite their lack of presence earlier in the policy process (Weiss 1997; Brooks and Miljan 2003).

While outright "success" or "failure" might be difficult to determine, the goal of evaluation is to ensure that policies or programs are fulfilling their mandates. This can be problematic, as Montpetit (2003) notes: "Even where objectives are clearly stated and early results can be expected, deciding whether results meet objectives can always be viewed either as a glass half full or a glass half empty" (22). Additionally, evaluation has been used to distract from the action or inaction in an area, to dodge responsibility, or to simply fulfil grant requirements (Brooks and Miljan 2003). If evaluations are not considered a "success", then the policy process continues with the agenda setting stage.

Having explored the process of policy making, the importance of the social, political, and institutional context – including the nature of the political system and the actors involved in policy making – it is now time to focus more carefully on the definition, construction, and measurement of public opinion.

Public Opinion

In order to fully address the problem of the possible connections between public opinion and public policy, it is first necessary to explore what is meant by public opinion, including its component parts of “public” and “opinion”. Although public opinion has become largely defined in terms of the processes of measuring it (as with public opinion polling), there is much more underlying the concept than the process of measurement (Petry 2007; Herbst 1998). It is extremely important to capture the nuances of the various definitions, as how the public, opinion, and public opinion are defined and constructed is reflected in theories of the relationship between public opinion and public policy.

“The Public”

To begin with, there are a number of questions to be asked around the “public”. First, whom or what comprises the public? Second, is there only one public? Third, are public(s) homogenous? Finally, where is the public located? Many argue that the “public”, as a subject of research, is not always the same creature. Splichal (1999) notes a variety of different publics that one could discuss:

...there is also a “voting public” (i.e., a body of actual voters), an “attentive public” (characterized by the interest in politics and at least occasional participation in debates on political issues), an “active public” (representing the elite of the attentive public”, and “sectoral” or “special publics”, which merely by their size (the number of members) differ greatly from each other (16).

While it has been argued that the search for ‘an infinite number of publics’ is problematic for the discussion of opinion, many researchers have also pointed to the differing importance of the various publics (Bourdieu 1979; Converse 1987). However, others have argued that special publics limit access to the ‘greater’ public, which raises some concerns about whether special publics can be considered public at all – rather, they should be considered elites or special interests (Converse 1987). These may be referred to as “opinion leaders” or “opinion makers”.

The public is, by its very nature, heterogeneous. Although the term “public opinion” is often used to imply a unanimous viewpoint, individual members of the public clearly hold very different views on any one issue. In addition, each issue is usually of interest to only particular segments of the public (Emery 1994). Additionally, polling and other measures of public opinion include members of the public who are not interested in particular issues, yet they are still encouraged to express opinions. However, despite these understandings, some measurement of public opinion – particularly polling – aggregates individual opinions and limits visible heterogeneity.

John Dewey (1947) argues that the public is actually constructed: it is a consequence of transactions between individuals and (nonpolitical) groups, which requires regulation by the state (public institutions) (as cited in Splichal 1999, 16-7; see also Glynn et al 2006). Thus, the public – and public opinion – is generally tied to a particular nation state. We are not yet at the stage in the globalization process in which

we would talk of a global public opinion – even the Eurobarometer, which measures public opinion throughout Western Europe – does not claim to measure a European public’s opinion. However, while opinion is still predominantly discussed in relation to a particular state (Splichal 1999), it is clear that this is changing. International surveys such as the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the World Values Survey (WVS), and the Afrobarometer all attempt to explore comparative public opinion while expanding our collective understanding of opinion beyond borders.

Opinion

There is as much discussion in the literature around what constitutes “opinion” as there is on how we constitute the public holding the opinion. One of the most fundamental discussions around opinion is how it can be understood. It is not uncommon to refer to values, beliefs, and attitudes when talking about opinion (Mendelsohn and Brent 2001). Values and beliefs are generally assumed to underlie attitudes and opinions, but are understood to be much more stable and enduring than attitudes and opinions (Funk 2000; Sharp 1999). Feldman and Zaller have argued that “...individuals do not typically possess ‘true attitudes’ on issues, as conventional theorizing assumes, but a series of partially independent and often inconsistent ones” (as cited in Zaller 1992, 93; see also Feldman and Zaller 1992). Splichal (1999) argues that “...it is not only that the true object of public opinion research is not *public* opinion, and not even opinion, but rather that *private attitudes* are the object of research” (29, emphasis added).

Others propose that survey responses, or measured “opinion” is actually a result of a social interaction between the respondent and the interviewer, which may also taint

the resulting opinion (Berinsky 1999; Deutscher 1972). Still others emphasize emotions, arguing that "...even the well-informed rely on feelings about politically salient groups and individuals when making their political choices" (Gidengil 2002, 88).

One of the major concerns around the definition and resulting measures of opinion revolves around the forthrightness of the interviewed citizen, and whether or not s/he may "...choose to abstain from specific questions rather than give opinions which might paint them in an unfavourable light" (Berinsky 1999, 1210). If true opinions are not expressed, then the resulting aggregate "public opinion" will not be an accurate measure of public opinion (Glynn et al 2006; Noelle-Neumann 1983).

In order to address this issue, individuals who may feel uncomfortable answering a survey question truthfully may be given a 'way out' if the interview is designed with a "no response" or "don't know" option. Most often it is assumed that respondents do not answer survey questions because they are unsure about how they feel about an issue, but it may also be that they do not want to reveal their true preferences to an interviewer (Berinsky 1999; Noelle-Neumann 1983; Deutscher 1972; Mendelsohn and Brent 2001).

Others have noted that individuals may hold opinions that are contingent, and rely upon the context in which they are given. As Irwin Deutscher (1973) notes, "...the opinion we express in one public is not necessarily the same as that we express in a different public" (219). Individuals may express opinions in different publics that seem irreconcilable to researchers, but that make sense to the individuals. Cantril and Davis Cantril (1999) propose that there is a long history of survey respondents sending mixed messages about what they want to see government doing. On one hand, they may express general views about what government should undertake. On the other hand, they

may provide information about specific programs or activities that seems to contradict their general views. Cantril and Davis Cantril (1999) conclude that

...we also know that the ways people work things through in their minds can vary from subject to subject, can be influenced by the extent to which values may be in conflict, and can be affected by assumptions that have been built up through past experience (10).

Gidengil (2002) speaks to the sometimes gap between policy preferences and values or between principle and practice by arguing that this gap might reflect "...the fundamental contestability of rights, rather than a simple failure of understanding..." (84).

Finally, the literature suggests that opinions are changeable. They may not be consistent from survey to survey over time. Opinions may also change based on how questions are asked or "framed", or what is happening in the world.¹¹ Noelle-Neumann (1983) argues that there are three social elements that affect individual opinions, and are linked to the process of public opinion:

...1) the human ability to realize when public opinions grow in strength or weaken; 2) the reactions to this realization, leading either to more confident speech or to silence; and 3) the fear of isolation that makes most people willing to heed the opinion of others (62).

Public Opinion

As with public policy, it has been said that there are almost as many definitions of public opinion as there are writers on public opinion (Hennessey 1985 as cited in Young 1992: 171). Debate around these concepts are not new: discussions that took place in the 1930s and 1940s United States very much mirror discussions around public opinion that scholars have today. Constructivist scholars like Herbst (1998) has argued that although the character of the debates might remain similar, the meaning of public opinion is in fact

¹¹ The literature on "framing" shows that people's responses to an issue or problem often depends on how it is portrayed. See Kuklinski (2001) and Druckman (2001) for further discussion.

contingent: "...the social climate, technological milieu, and communication environment in any democratic state together determine the way we think about public opinion and the ways we try to measure it" (8).

Glynn et al (2006) outline five informative definitions of public opinion that are commonly used in the literature today. Although these definitions each encapsulate a different way of thinking about public opinion, there is overlap among them. First, public opinion can be understood as "...an aggregation of individual opinions" (19). This most common definition of public opinion has become conflated with technical questions about how to measure opinion. One of the most pressing issues in both the current literature and in the American public opinion literature of the 1930s and 1940s is the seeming reduction of "public opinion" to the results of public opinion polls. Herbert Blumer (1947), an early constructivist, argued that:

...the summation of individual opinions in "one person, one vote" style across a given jurisdiction in standard poll result form was exactly what public opinion was not. What it was instead was a kind of complex organic whole, which mirrored the organization of society into functional groups, each hierarchically structured, between which exist complex communication patterns and inter-relationships. The only entity worthy of the name of public opinion is something generated by interactions in such a structure and which is "effective" in the sense that people in positions of power judge it to be worth taking into account (as cited in Converse 1987, S13).

Pierre Bourdieu (1979) further emphasized the disconnect between the concept of public opinion and its measurement in public opinion polls. He argued that "...the opinion survey treats public opinion like the simple sum of individual opinions, gathered in an isolated situation where the individual furtively expresses an isolated opinion" (128) thus ignoring the importance of the social, economic, and political context individuals operate within.

Arguing against this perspective on public opinion, early pollsters George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley (in the U.S. private sector) and Henry Wallace and Rensis Likert (in the U.S. Department of Agriculture before 1940) focused on the democratic possibilities posed by public opinion research – particularly public opinion polling. They were “...pleased to provide a means that the voice of the people might be more clearly heard to compete with the few voices in the ears of power that Blumer felt was all that public opinion could “realistically” be” (as cited in Converse 1987, S15).

The importance of not conflating the definition of public opinion with its measurement – particularly with polling – is emphasized by Christopher Page (2006), who argues that there are in fact two forms of public opinion, active and passive. Passive opinion collection or expression is associated with polling, and sometimes with focus groups: people expressing opinions through public opinion polls are contacted and asked for their opinions – very little initiative is needed by the individual respondents. Thus, some may have strong opinions and others may not.

Active forms of public opinion expression, such as interest group activities, petitions, mass media involvement (including letters to the editor, talk radio shows), public meetings, constituent communications, as well as internet communications (Glynn et al 2006) “...come from people who take the initiative to express their views” (Page 2006, 15). People expressing these opinions would be expected to be relatively well-informed, engaged, and have higher levels of both income and education than those expressing “passive” opinions. These forms of expression may be more important to politicians, because “these opinion are more ‘vivid and emotion laden’ than opinion polls, and they tend to be better remembered and therefore may influence the political

calculations of decision-makers” (Page 2006, 15). Others have argued that it is vital to go beyond the passive outcomes of public opinion polling when assessing public opinion, emphasizing that there are many more places that citizens’ opinions can be found (Glynn et al 2006, 4).

Others emphasize the importance of the variety of ways of assessing public opinion – and not relying simply on the results of public opinion polls. Petry (2007) argues that

...A government’s mandate to implement a policy agenda does not come only from actual – or simulated – support as measured by polls, but also from a societal understanding of whether public support exists, which is constructed from many elements other than polling, such as media reports and demands from interest groups (376).

However, despite continued debate around what is actually being measured in public opinion polls, there is much support for the continued use of scientifically conducted polls in the measurement of public opinion. Sidney Verba (1996) argues that

...sample surveys provide the closest approximation to an unbiased representation of the public because participation in a survey requires no resources and because surveys eliminate the selection bias inherent in the fact that participants in politics are self-selected (3).

Converse (1987) notes that “what the firm establishment of a public opinion polling industry has done is to homogenize the definition [of public opinion] and to stabilize it for the foreseeable future” (S13). Further, Herbst (2001) argues that “...the meaning of public opinion is often dictated by the tools we have on hand to measure it at any given historical moment” (451). Despite concerns about the reduction of public opinion to the results of opinion polls, it could well be concluded that public opinion has come to mean (at least in practice), the summing up of a series of disparate individual opinions and with its measurement by public opinion surveys (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

A second definition of public opinion is that of public opinion as a reflection of majority beliefs (Glynn et al 2006). Researchers using this definition "...[report] that people do pay close attention to the opinions of friends, coworkers, and neighbours and tend to conform to majority opinion among their significant others" (Glynn et al 2006, 21).

Third, Glynn et al (2006) argue that public opinion can be "...found in the clash of group interests" (22). Public opinion becomes a result of "...public debate among groups" (22). Interest groups are considered to be more important – and more powerful – communicators of opinion than are individuals. They are more able to access members of the media and more likely to be heard by politicians, particularly if they are considered valid representatives (see Herbert Blumer, as cited in Glynn et al 2006, 22).

The fourth definition of public opinion expressed by Glynn et al (2006) is that public opinion is not the "public's" opinion at all – rather, it is a combination of media and elite opinion. Converse (1987) notes that public opinion in the early 20th century – and in earlier times - was defined solely as "...views on public affairs held by those community notables who kept themselves informed and pondered on such matters at length" (S13). Further, the concept of "opinion leader" emphasizes the importance of elite opinion leading the masses (Weimann 1994). Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that public opinion was a "phantom" manipulated by a variety of parties – elites – who wished solely to legitimate their positions or actions.

Later, Quaille Hill and Hinton-Anderson (1995) argued that any observable consistency between public opinion and public policy occurs because there is a "...reciprocal influence process where elites and the mass public share policy

preferences” (925). Not only does the media and elite opinion influence the “public”, “public opinion” may also be used symbolically by media and elites. Herbst (1998) argues that public opinion is also a “...symbol, a rhetorical being referred to by legislative professionals and journalists in their conversations with each other...” (2; see also Lippman 1922).

Fifth and finally, Glynn et al (2006) point to the definition of public opinion as “a fiction” (25). Bourdieu (1979) dismissed the idea of the measurement of public opinion, stating that public opinion

...does not exist in the form which some people, whose existence depends on this illusion, would have us believe. At present, there is, on the one hand, mobilized opinion, formulated opinion, pressure groups mobilized around a system of interests; and on the other, certain inclinations, opinions in an implicit state why, by definition are not really opinions, if by opinion we mean a formulated discourse with a pretention to coherence (129-130).

Further, those who use this definition of public opinion argue that “...public opinion can also be manufactured through sophisticated public relations efforts and the use of visual imagery, to make it seem as though there is majority opinion on a topic” (Glynn et al 2006, 27; see also Lippman 1922).

A crucial part of defining public opinion focuses on the content of public opinion and its focus. Susan Herbst (1998) argues that citizens themselves see public opinion “...as part of an argument they make - to themselves, and, at times, to others - about *political life* more generally” (7, emphasis added). The emphasis being placed on public opinion as being about politics - including public policy and decision-making - was also prevalent in early 20th century American discussions. John Dewey (1947) emphasized that public opinion “...is a judgement which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs” (as cited in Splichal 1999, 20).

Public Opinion and Public Policy

Much of the democratic responsiveness literature concerning how public opinion relates to public policy is largely focused on whether or not public policy reflects or responds to public opinion (as measured through public opinion polls), and why that relationship might exist. There are a number of problems with this approach. First, concluding that there is a relationship between public opinion and public policy in itself excludes various models of policy making that would emphasize the importance of interest groups, political parties, or elites while leaving no visible role for public opinion to play. Second, focusing on public policy outputs "...narrowly assumes that there must be a causal effect between public opinion (seen as the independent variable) and policy (viewed as the dependent variable)" (Petry 2007, 375). Third, focusing on outputs negates any discussion of how public opinion might be influential during other stages of the policy making process.

However, despite these limitations, there are many ways to examine the role of public opinion in the policy making process (even if that role is to be ignored by decision-makers), that can be placed on a continuum from the "...most cynical or least sanguine (from the viewpoint of classical democratic theory) to what others might view as the most optimistic" (Sharp 1999: 3). These approaches can also be understood as falling into two categories: either public policy is *not* responsive to public opinion (non-responsiveness theories) or public policy *is* responsive to public opinion (responsiveness theories).

Public Policy *is not* Responsive to Public Opinion (Non-responsiveness Theories)

Theorists who attempt to explain why public policy may not change to reflect public opinion shifts propose a number of different reasons why policy makers may not be responsive to the public. As with the responsiveness theories, the non-responsiveness theories are built on normative assumptions: either there is something inherently problematic with the public that their opinions (if they are opinions) cannot (or should not) be trusted or it is the job of the political elite to educate or manipulate the public so that their opinions reflect those of the elite and support existing or proposed policies. These assumptions are related to understandings of the public, of opinion, and/or of public opinion; as well as to conceptions of policy formation, the context for decision-making, and who makes decisions.

Non-Attitudes Approach

The “non-attitudes” approach suggests that public opinion is irrelevant to public policy because “...public opinion, at least as evidenced in poll data, is not real or meaningful (i.e., there is nothing for policy to be responsive to” (Sharp 1999, 3). Four main premises underlie the non-attitudes approach. First, it has been argued that public opinion is “fraught with non-attitudes” because attitudes have been observed to be inconsistent over time. Second, there is an observed lack of ideological structuring or other coherent opinion patterning. Third, opinion as measured in public opinion polls changes can be manipulated. Finally, it is widely accepted that the general public has little knowledge of, and interest in, most issues in public affairs (Mondak and Creel Davis 2001; Sharp 1999).

Ultimately, the non-attitudes approach takes as its fundamental premise the understanding that there is no such thing as public opinion, and it is problematic to even suggest that public policy should be responsive to something that does not exist (Bourdieu 1979). As Sharp (1999) summarizes,

If there is no real public opinion, and if, as some of the literature suggests, popular responses to candidates and issues are instead based on gut-level, emotional reactions rather than cognitively-based reactions, then there is little need for public officials to try to create policy that is in line with public preferences (4).

However, it must be noted that scholars such as Zaller (1992) and Druckman (2001) have re-visited the question of the general public's knowledge and attitudes, and would challenge the conclusions of the non-attitudes theorists.

Manipulated Opinion Interpretation

The “manipulated opinion” interpretation argues that if there is a correlation between public opinion and public policy, it is because opinion has been manipulated to bring it into line with existing or proposed policy rather than resulting from opinion influencing the direction of policy. When public opinion is manipulated by political elites, the correlation between policy and opinion is not evidence of policy responsiveness (Druckman 2001).

Benjamin Ginsburg argues that

...modern governments have become [so] sophisticated in the use of public relations techniques, that public opinion has been tamed and channelled through the institutionalization of opinion polls and that governments therefore can “manage, manipulate, and use public sentiments” (in Sharp 1999, 12).

Public opinion can be used to supply an aura of legitimacy to actions taken, or not taken, by government. When consistency between policy and public opinion results from

government mobilization of public opinion, rather than from responsiveness, that legitimacy has been falsely created (Page 2006). As Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) argue, “Politicians track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters favour” (xiii). This approach is premised on the understanding that policy makers can access and use the media for this purpose, an understanding that is borne out in the literature (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Iyengar and Reeves 1997; Page 2006).

When considering this approach, however, it is important to distinguish between what Page and Shapiro (1992) deem to be the *education* of the public and the *manipulation* of the public. Manipulation involves providing fallacious or misleading information, designed to result in the public making wrong decisions about policy options or government decisions (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992). However, it is important to note that there is a difference between manipulation, resulting in the “wrong” public policy decisions, and education, which would result in the “correct” decisions.

Democratic Frustration

The “non-responsiveness” interpretation, or what Joel E. Brooks (1985) calls “democratic frustration” proposes that public policy can be, and often is, out of line with public policy. Much of the non-responsiveness approach is premised on assumptions in two areas: the salience of particular policy areas to the mass public and the corresponding likelihood of the public’s mobilization. It is clear that some policy areas do not resonate

with the public as much as other areas do, and that citizen knowledge is related to this (Kuklinski 2002; Mondak and Davis 2001; Page 2006).

It is also assumed that because public opinion polling, for example, aggregates both “active” and “passive” citizens’ opinions, it is not a useful tool as decision makers do not always know what percentage of citizens are more likely to act on their opinions (by writing letters to elected officials, making public statements, taking part in a demonstration, etc), versus staying passive.¹² In certain cases, issues may resonate more with particular publics than with others. Differences in the relative importance of these publics may have an impact on decision makers’ inclusion of public opinion concerns when making decisions. Converse (1987) notes that “...effective opinion can upon occasions depart widely from populist opinion” (S21), and that this is part of a natural process.

It may be argued that there may be a conflict between the idea of responsiveness and the idea of political leadership. It must also be remembered that although polls have become widely used by governments to gauge opinion on particular issues and policies, they do not always respond to what they find. As Emery (1994) states:

...the appeal and popularity of polls would seem to lie in their apparent ability to quantify something that is not easily quantifiable. [However,] the use of polls by governments does not necessarily mean that they will refrain from pursuing unpopular policies and doing “what is right” (10).

Brooks also posits that if public opinion diverges from that of the political elites, then the public will be unsuccessful in achieving its desired ends (as cited in Petry 1999). Instead of democratic responsiveness, Brooks argues that this can be understood as a clear

¹² This is an argument in support of looking at a variety of different kinds of measures of public opinion, as well as looking further into what decision makers rely on to assess the public mood. It is also the impetus behind polls attempting to identify “opinion leaders” in the public, in order to assess which respondents are likely to take some action or have an influential force in the public with regard to particular policy areas.

example of democratic frustration. In addition, governments may not always respond in the ways in which the public may want or expect. Democratic responsiveness theories suggest that policy outputs should directly reflect the desires of the public, but it may be that governments choose to respond in a different way to public opinion – moving slightly toward public opinion but perhaps not as far as the public might want, or choosing alternative policy instruments, or taking delayed action.

Sharp (1999) argues that in fact public policy may remain out of alignment with public opinion because the public may not be aware of particular policies or policy shifts.

She notes that:

...the re-election decisions imperative motivates legislators and presidents to make policy decisions in accordance with popular preferences only if the content of those policy decisions will be evident to the mass public and only if responsibility for those policy choices can be clearly traced (20).

Evidence also suggests that elected officials can avoid the political repercussions of being non-responsive to public opinion by taking symbolic actions (Cohen 1997). The process of consulting the public through opinion measurement and the use of this opinion in the early stages of policy making (such as in the agenda-setting stage) both contain symbolic elements which can offset the ramifications of not responding to opinion in other stages of the policy process (Page 2006; Butler 2007).

Public Policy *is* Responsive to Public Opinion

The “responsiveness” or “democratic responsiveness” approaches posit that public opinion does in fact have a real impact on the direction and content of public policy. Based on the pluralist conception of the formation of mass opinion and the distribution of political power, democratic responsiveness theories posit that public

opinion "...is expected to be an autonomous force capable of shaping policy agendas and determining the actions of receptive policymakers" (Petry 1999, 540).

However, there is an external contradiction between the *expression* of public opinion (through opinion polls or letters to the editor) and the *realization* of that public opinion through policy and/or societal changes. It is this contradiction that we are particularly interested in when talking about democratic responsiveness theories. Sharp (1999) points out that policy responsiveness means that public policy is consistent with public opinion,

...although that consistency might mean that policy remains within a broad zone of indifference rather than an exact correspondence between public opinion and public policy. In this sense, public opinion serves as a key constraint on government action, rather than a causal agent for governing outcomes (21).

It has been suggested that strong consensus in public opinion should be enough, in a democratic state, to ensure a shift in policy toward something more in line with opinion (Petry 1999; Glynn et al 2006). As Emery (1994) has noted, "governments and political parties use polls to assist them in defining and prioritizing their positions on various contentious issues" (8). Shifts in public opinion could be seen as a call for government to do something about a particular issue or situation. Splichal (1999) argues that consensus in public opinion is actually a mechanism of societal change.

However, it must also be noted that there must be a certain *degree* of consensus on an issue before one could expect any government reaction. An issue must be seen as salient by governments in order for response to occur (Petry 1999). If there is a large majority of opinion that supports a policy change, then that change is much more likely to occur than if there is limited consensus within the public. John Geer (1996) argues that it is only when issues are not deemed to be salient with the public that decision makers

have the ability to either ignore public opinion or to work to manipulate it (as cited in Sharp 1999, 246).

Contingent Approach

It has been argued that the type of public policy and its institutional, political, and social environment may have an impact on the links between public opinion and public policy (Montpetit 2003). The “contingent approach” is premised on the understanding of a variety of different contingencies. Contingencies could include the institutional venue within which the policy is developing (including at what level of government it is applicable) who is involved in the policy community, and who the constituents are deemed to be (Sharp 1999, 26). Another defining contingency could be whether or not a policy is designed to provide material benefits or symbolic outcomes. Finally, a policy could be defined as easy or difficult to understand by the public. Difficult issues, involving technical detail or expert knowledge, are more likely to invoke an “unknowledgeable” response from citizens and for policy makers to ignore opinion as a result. These collected contingencies may impact decision makers’ choice to access public opinion – or not – while making decisions.

Thermostatic Model

Some have argued that the mass public can be understood as acting as a “thermostat” for the level of policy involvement undertaken, rather than as a direct influence on particular policies per se (Wlezien 1995; Wlezien and Soroka 2003). If the public prefers a higher (or lower) level of spending in a particular area, then there is

support for a corresponding change in policy. If the public favours greater spending than is currently allocated, a corresponding increase in government spending would be expected within the next budget cycle. When the policy changes after the wishes of the public are expressed, there should be a corresponding shift in public opinion when the public's attitudes should adjust to the revised policy. Converse (1987) argues that the consultation process, during which public opinion is assessed by decision makers, is a

...delicate process of mutual adjustment and accommodation between the revealed opinion of constituents and one's own convictions. The results of this accommodation are rarely seen in responses that are dramatically out of character for the representative; but it is hard to deny that a good deal of influence, a great deal of it subtle, some less so, is taking place (S22).

A problem that can develop in the policy-opinion nexus is referred to as the broken thermostat. Instead of shifts in policy (which were based on shifts in public opinion) being followed by adjustments in public opinion as they would in the thermostatic model, the public continues to demand more and more change in a particular policy area (Wlezien 1995; Wlezien and Soroka 2003) – possibly due to imperfect information (Sharp 1999). Ultimately, although public policy is initially responsive to shifts in public opinion, the gap between opinion and policy continues to widen.

Policy Learning Sequence

The policy learning sequence, in which both public opinion and public policy shift as a result of ideas discussed at the elite level, is yet another model of the opinion-policy relationship. As Sharp (1999) notes,

...the politics of ideas that is fought out at the elite level may gradually seep out, first to highly attentive publics and ultimately to the public more generally.

Indeed, the very politicization of the policy learning process may help to ensure that there is a transmission belt to the broader public, with transformative consequences for erstwhile non-attitudes (32).

This approach proposes that the mass public starts out in a non-attitudes phase, but then responds to education from elites. Once the public is educated about a particular policy, public opinion shifts and policy follows (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Sharp (1999) also notes that "...inconsistencies between opinion and policy can be transformed into consistency if political elites appropriately educate the mass public" (18).

Path Dependency Approach (Downsian Sequence)

A final approach to understanding decision makers' responsiveness to public opinion is based on the premise that policy change is path dependent. Decisions made at one point will ultimately restrict decision making in the future. Thus, early policy decisions may be made based at least in part on public opinion, but then become locked in to a particular path, and stray further and further away from public opinion as time goes on (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Based on Anthony Downs' (1972) ideas of issue attention cycles, Sharp (1999) argues that:

...we might expect cycles of policy development that begin with substantial responsiveness to public opinion (during the phrase of frenzied popular concern with a problem), only to be replaced by a sustained period of discrepancy between public opinion and policy as the institutional sub-system responsible for policy implementation makes key decisions that move policy away from the initial consensus (71).

Downsian cycles may not be permanent, and public policy may again (at some point in the future) break away from its path and respond to changes in public opinion.

Responsiveness or Non-Responsiveness?

Despite being faced with this multitude of approaches to public opinion and public policy's "sometime connection", Sharp (1999) points out that it seems premature to say that one theoretical understanding of the policy-opinion nexus would be suitable for all policies all of the time. Instead, it may be more useful to choose from a variety of theories at various points in time. In this study, it may in fact be necessary to refer to all these theories in the attempt to understand the varying relationships between changing public opinion and public policies – in part because of the varying definitions of public policy conceptualized by policy actors.

In much of the discussion around the connection between public policy and public opinion, the focus on connections between inputs and outputs negates – or does not pay enough attention to – the involvement or impact of public opinion on various points in the cycle. Including the concepts of the policy system and the policy community in this project ensures that policy making is not reduced to outcomes or outputs, but is seen as a series of processes which can be impacted before, during, and after decisions are made.

Conclusions

Conceptualizing public policy and public opinion and their component parts allows for the operationalization of these terms and measuring relationships between them. Understanding the variety of ways that public policy can be defined – while noting that most definitions refer to the primacy of government in policy-making, the need to understand policy as a process as well as an output, and policy as goal-oriented behaviour – acknowledges the many ways that policy could be understood and measured. Focusing

on Peters' (1993) definition of policy as “the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens” (4) and supplementing it with Brooks and Miljan's (2003) conception of the deliberate nature of policy as action or inaction ensures that the measurement of public policy decisions can be constructed for this research project.

The policy community, within which public policy is made, is a vital part of this research project. The policy community – or policy actors and their activities – contains both the sub-government, including elected officials; civil servants - including deputy ministers, associate/assistant deputies, executive directors, and directors; and interest groups; and the attentive public, which comprises the public, the mass media, research organizations and think-tanks, and political parties.

Public policy can be understood to be made within a political system (Easton 1965) which contains both inputs – delivered via the sub-government and/or the attentive public and through existing institutions – and outputs, in the form of policy decisions. Although part of the attentive public in terms of the policy community, public opinion plays an important role in responding to and influencing government decisions – primarily through the electoral process – but also through between-election expressions of opinion.

Understanding public policy formation as a five-stage process or cycle is key for this project's understanding of the relationship between public opinion and public policy. By emphasizing the role that public opinion may or may not play at each stage in the policy-making process, it is possible to gain a wider understanding of the “sometime”

relationship between opinion and policy, and where policy actors may find public opinion useful.

Having defined public policy, assessed the policy-making environment and its component actors as well as the political system within which policy-making occurs, it becomes necessary to define public opinion. Making use of a series of possible definitions (provided by Glynn et al 2006) ensures that a broad assessment of public opinion as defined by policy actors is likely and the scope of the project is not unnecessarily narrowed. Finally, assessing the different theories that are used to explain the relationship between public policy and public opinion – whether policy responds or does not respond to opinion – ensures that we know that it is important to understand the relationship between opinion and policy is not easily or consistently explained.

Overall, understanding the policy actors as being part of a policy community within a political system ensures that policy making is not seen as something that is separate from – and not responsive to – its environment, which includes important actors. The focus on actors is an important one, because they are both impacted by and impact their environment within the political system. It is actors – and their resulting frameworks of rules – that structure the policy community, bringing their inter-group competition and cooperation, public opinion, and the mass media's coverage of and contributions to policy making into the political system. This complicated series of institutions and actors operating within the system is reflected in the relationship between public opinion and public policy. In part, Glynn et al (2006) argue that the interaction between opinion and policy is highly complex "...because communication among involved parties is so imperfect" (7).

In Chapter 3, this conceptual framework will be operationalized and used as the foundation for the research design as presented in the chapter. Conceptualizations of public policy, public opinion, the political system, the public policy-making cycle, and the policy community provide the key building blocks for this project.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to approach the problem of the relationship between public opinion and public policy from the perspective of political actors, or members of the policy community. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, much of the research undertaken to date that focuses on the opinion-policy relationship in Canada is quantitatively-based and focused on the national level. With the exception of the work being done by Petry (2007; Petry and Mendelsohn 2005) focusing on national-level political actors' perceptions of opinion, most of the Canadian work examines correlations between trends in national-level public opinion polls and shifts in national-level public policy (for example, see Wlezian and Soroka 2004; Brooks 1985).

This project was designed to explore four gaps in the opinion-policy discussion: 1) the provincial situation, 2) the experiences of policy makers themselves, 3) the types of policy areas explored, and 4) the limited way in which public opinion has been measured. These gaps are addressed in the following ways. First, this project uses Saskatchewan as a case study, allowing for the examination of the opinion-policy relationship in a provincial context. Second, information gathered from members of the Saskatchewan post-secondary education policy community ensures that it is possible to explore their opinions, attitudes, and experiences related to public opinion and policy making. Third, the focus on university tuition fees and student financial assistance adds to the opinion-policy literature by exploring an area not previously included in Canadian research.

Fourth, public opinion is conceptualized to include letters to the editor, opinion-editorial pieces, and interest group communications as well as polling results, which provides a more complete picture of public opinion while ensuring a solid basis for analysis of public opinion's impact on policy actors and policy outcomes.

This chapter outlines the methodological approaches to this project, beginning with the overarching research design. This section includes a discussion of the research questions and hypotheses framing the work, the research participants – members of the policy community – who were approached and included in the project, the unit of analysis for the project, and the research variables included. The next section outlines the data collection procedures that were followed, including particular challenges that needed to be addressed during the data collection process. A discussion of data collection and analysis follows, including an assessment of data quality (sources of error, reliability, validity). An overview of the summary of this project's methodology concludes this chapter.

Research Design

This project was designed around a particular case: that of university tuition fees and student loan policy in Saskatchewan between the years 1991 and 2004. Although the case study addresses changes throughout the thirteen year period, the study was not designed to allow for longitudinal (and quantitative) analysis of change over time. Rather, the policy history – an examination of university tuition fees and student loan policy – provides a context for the evaluation of the opinions and attitudes toward public

opinion and public policy held by policy actors, or members of the policy community, during that time period.

This approach also allows for the introduction of variables other than policy actor-specific ones that may have an impact public policy, and the role that public opinion may play in policy making. For example, the inclusion of a policy history allows for the examination of indications of government policy and intentions through Speeches from the Throne, Budget Speeches, and Party Platforms during elections while also accessing media coverage and other sources of information for use in triangulating results received from the respondents.

The first element of the research project was to create a policy history, which drew in information on public policy in the following areas: public discussion (including media coverage), actions and communications from government and political parties (including elected officials and public servants), actions and communications from interest groups, and evidence of public policy changes. By providing “information on the unique features and environment of each case” (O’Sullivan, Rassel, and Berner 2008: 39), it becomes possible to understand how and why these features can have an impact on the relationship between public opinion and public policy. It also provides additional information on members of the policy community throughout the relevant time period.

The second and third elements of the research project involve members of the policy community. As this is essentially a cross-sectional design that involves members of the policy community constructed over a period of thirteen years, the research is focused on examining the opinions and experiences of those involved in the policy community over this time rather than comparing changes in opinions over time. The

design involves asking people to both reflect on their current understandings and experiences, while looking retrospectively at their previous experiences (Fink 2003). The self-administered questionnaire and semi-structured telephone interview were designed to facilitate the gathering of this information.

Taken together, these three elements of the research – each providing a different “line of sight” on the problem – will help provide a “better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements” (Berg 2001, 4).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Overall, three research questions shape this study on public opinion and public policy.

They are:

1. How do political actors define public opinion? What are the most important measures for different groups of actors?
2. How does public opinion impact public policy formation in this particular policy area: university tuition fees and student loans?
3. How would actors account for a seeming lack of concern for public opinion in particular policy cases, where opinion clearly deviates from policy outcomes?

The nine proposed hypotheses provide possible explanations for what is seen in the policy case study:

H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways. As has been demonstrated in a number of studies, public opinion means very different things to different people. Often the focus is on public opinion as measured in

opinion polls, but it also can be understood as letters from constituents, media communication, and interest group communication.

H2: In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups. It is possible that knowing that the product of the public opinion research is to be automatically publicly released – without waiting for a citizen to submit a Freedom of Information request – may have an impact both on what questions are asked and on the use of their results.

H3: There is an identified role(s) for public opinion in policy-making that differs by policy community membership.

H4: Policy community members have different conceptions of *where* in the policy cycle public opinion is important for themselves and for most other policy actors.

H5: How political actors define public opinion (in terms of measurement) is related to its role in policy-related activities. For example, if opinion is defined as being measured through polling and government-commissioned polls are seen as being less useful than other forms of opinion measurement, that reality will have an impact on an actors' use of polls in decision making.

H6: Convergence in public opinion is more likely to have an impact on political actors than opinion that does not overwhelmingly support one policy direction or another.

H7: Issue salience is key. If a majority of citizens identify an issue as a priority (such as through a poll or survey), political actors are more likely to respond to public opinion on the issue.

H8: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when it is more salient to a particular public that is less politically powerful.

H9: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when the policy trade-offs required would result in a backlash from a wider public.

Research Participants

As discussed in Chapter 2, nine groups were originally identified as being part of Saskatchewan's post-secondary education policy community between the years 1991 and 2004. This focus was then narrowed to exclude political parties, leaving the focus on the eight remaining groups: elected officials (Cabinet Ministers with Responsibility for Post-Secondary Education and Official Opposition Critics); staff to elected officials (Senior Ministerial Assistants), Deputy Ministers, senior government officials or the civil service (Assistant and Associate Deputy Ministers, Executive Directors, and Directors of Policy,

Programs, and Communications); media (Journalists); public opinion researchers (Pollsters); and the two interest groups (University Student Union Representatives and University Presidents) – were first defined and then identified using a series of informational sources including government directories, university press releases, student union directories, print media coverage, annual reports (university and government), government and political party press releases, and information provided by relevant organizations. How these groups were each defined and who they included are discussed in this section.

Elected Officials: Cabinet Ministers with Responsibility for Post-Secondary Education

Between 1991 and 2004, Saskatchewan had ten Ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education. Although the departments represented by these Ministers changed names (and structures) three times during this period, the responsibility for student loan programs and tuition fees remained in the same department, although in separate branches. Throughout the 1991 to 2004 period, various branches had responsibility for the universities, while the Student Financial Assistance Branch remained consistent. Reporting structures changed over time, with the branches reporting to different senior officials (i.e. either directly to the Deputy Minister or to a specific Assistant Deputy Minister) at different times – in part due to changes in responsibilities but likely also in part due to the personalities of the actors involved.

Table 3.1 Departments with Responsibility for Post-Secondary Education

Years	Department with Responsibility for Post-Secondary Education
to 1992	Department of Education
1992-1995	Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment
1995-2002	Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training
2002-2007	Department of Learning

Source: Saskatchewan Education, Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment, Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, and Department of Learning Annual Reports 1991 to 2007.

Staff to Elected Officials: Senior Ministerial Assistants

An important element in the policy community is staff to elected officials. Information about who the senior ministerial assistants were after 2000 was challenging to find, as after 2000 there does not seem to be a list maintained centrally. Additionally, these former staff were often quite mobile, and are now spread across the country and internationally. In total, thirty former ministerial assistants were identified and included in the research project.

Senior Departmental Officials: Deputy, Associate, and Assistant Deputy Ministers; Executive Directors and Directors

A number of positions were identified as part of the senior departmental officials category. While some positions changed throughout the 1991 to 2004 period, others remained consistent – such as the Deputy Minister and Assistant Deputy Minister positions. Deputy Ministers are the senior administrators, with responsibility for

translating direction from the Minister to the department and providing support for the Minister, while also supporting policy development and programming within the department. During the relevant time period, there were five Deputy Ministers of post-secondary education departments. For analytical purposes, the Deputy Ministers will be considered a discrete group, given their particular role of negotiating between the civil service and elected officials.

In addition, there were two Associate Deputy Ministers appointed during this time period. It must be noted, however, that these Deputy and Associate Deputy Ministers often served repeatedly throughout the 1991 to 2004 period. Between 1991 and 2004 there were five Deputy Ministers in total, but two served approximately ten of those thirteen years: one in a five year block, and the other in a six year period interrupted by a change for six months. Two Associate Deputy Ministers with responsibility for student loans and/or universities were in place for a total of five years.

Assistant Deputy Ministers are also considered an important part of the department, and of the policy community. In the Saskatchewan context, they were likely to have been assigned a particular portfolio – such as student financial assistance or the universities – that allowed them to potentially develop a closer relationship with other members of the policy community. Between 1991 and 2004, there were eight Assistant Deputy Ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education.

Senior departmental officials also included Executive Directors, and in some cases, Directors with responsibility for policies relating to university tuition fees and student loan policy. It has been argued that the bureaucracy's structure tends to change over time (Aberbach and Rockman 2002), which can make it that much more challenging

to consistently identify the people – and the positions – needed for this research project. However, when restructuring or organizational change meant that these positions changed, the most senior position in the relevant area was chosen to be included. In total, seventeen Executive Directors or Directors with responsibility for policy, university affairs/services, student financial assistance, and communications were identified as potential respondents.

Interest Groups: University Student Union Representatives

The University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina both have students' unions representing the interests of students enrolled in programs offered by their respective campuses. Although the Vice President External/External Relations of both students' unions is tasked with undertaking the "political" tasks of lobbying and campaign development (University of Regina Students' Union 2008b; University of Saskatchewan Students' Union 2008), the President of both organizations is the spokesperson who is often assigned the task of communicating with the media and leading campaigns, lobby efforts, liaising with senior administration of the university, and meeting with government on behalf of the students' union (University of Regina Students' Union 2008a; University of Saskatchewan Students' Union 2008). Because of the breadth and prominence of this position, the Presidents of the Students' Unions were included as key informants in the policy community. During the 1991 to 2004 period, there were thirteen presidents at the University of Saskatchewan Students' Union and twelve presidents at the University of Regina Students' Union.

As well as representing their memberships at the university level, the two university students' unions are also members of national-level umbrella organizations. The University of Regina is a member of the Canadian Federation of Students, representing students from across the country. The University of Saskatchewan has been both a member of the Canadian Federation of Students and of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA), of which the USSU was a founding member.¹³ In both cases, the two local students' unions elected people to represent them at the national level, as well as working within the provincial infrastructure – particularly for the case of the CFS-Saskatchewan chapter.

Both students' unions were members of the Canadian Federation of Students-Saskatchewan between 1990 and 1995, so representatives of the CFS-Saskatchewan were included as part of the interest group category for this research. A total of fourteen representatives represented Saskatchewan to the national-level organization between 1991 and 2004. Further, Saskatchewan representatives to the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) became de facto respondents in this research project, since the presidents of the University of Saskatchewan Students' Union were the primary delegates to the CASA national meetings. They were not counted separately. All student union representatives are considered part of one category for analytical purposes.

Interest Groups: University Presidents

Key representatives in the policy community are members of the university senior administration. For this research, the key informants are the Presidents of the two

¹³ U of S was a member of the Canadian Federation of Students from 1991 to 1998. It joined the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations in 1998 and retained membership in CASA throughout the rest of the study period.

Saskatchewan universities as they are most likely to be representing the universities to government, and to the policy community. As with the two students' unions, there are differences between the two universities' presidents, the universities' approaches to their roles in policy development, and in their relationships with government. As competitive players in a small province, the two universities have sometimes had an acrimonious relationship since the University of Regina was formally established as a university separate from the University of Saskatchewan in 1974.

During the 1990s there were a number of government-sponsored reports that sought to increase communication and cooperation between the universities, as well as addressing perceived and real inequalities in funding between the two. While the two universities are autonomous entities with their own presidents, university presidents – and the universities they represent – are treated primarily as a single category for this research because of the limited number of potential respondents.

Media

Saskatchewan has daily and weekly newspapers, three main television networks covering events in the province (CTV, CBC, and Global), several independent newspapers (including those published by students at both universities – the Carillon at the University of Regina and the Sheaf at the University of Saskatchewan), radio news shows (including call-in shows, or talk radio), and internet-based media that has developed over the past decade. Although the province clearly has a myriad of news coverage, the focus of this research is on print media – and particularly the two daily newspapers in Saskatoon and in Regina. Saskatoon's StarPhoenix and Regina's Leader-

Post both offer coverage of the two universities, as well as of the Legislature's activities during the time when the House is sitting.

Purchased by Hollinger in 1996, the StarPhoenix and Leader-Post had previously been owned by the Sifton family and the Armadale Group respectively. Hollinger then sold the two papers to CanWest Global Communications in 2000, and the StarPhoenix and Leader-Post became part of the CanWest News Service division. Although Saskatchewan is a small province, the two papers have had markedly different approaches to coverage of social and political issues. This difference is particularly noticeable when it comes to coverage of post-secondary education: between 1991 and 2004, the Saskatoon StarPhoenix had a journalist assigned specifically to post-secondary education whereas the Regina Leader-Post did not.

Although the variety of media sources in the province would all have something to contribute to any study of public opinion and public policy, the focus is on the two print dailies for a number of reasons. First, print journalists have traditionally experienced more time to write, the possibility of doing in-depth stories, and the ability to cultivate an ongoing connection with the universities. The two newspapers, being located in the same geographic areas as the two universities, offered coverage of the universities' activities. A second reason to focus on this type of print media involved the desire to access content consistently over time for analytical purposes.

During the 1991 to 2004 period, a total of twenty-eight journalists were identified through analysis of the post-secondary education newspaper articles. Of these, thirteen had written at least three stories or columns on post-secondary education. These journalists became part of the potential respondent list for the media category.

Public Opinion Researchers (Pollsters)

Public opinion researchers play a vital role in the policy community in terms of this project. The researchers – or pollsters – included in this project are the principles of the Saskatchewan-based firms that were contracted to conduct polling for the Government of Saskatchewan during the project timeframe. In total, the presidents of three firms were identified as being active in government-sponsored polling during this time.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this research project is the individual policy actor, which allows for the examination of individual ideas, perceptions, and experiences while aggregating responses to make generalizations about these individuals as part of specific groups (Babbie 2001). For the main body of the research, the responses of the individuals will be aggregated by group membership.

Research Variables

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing University Tuition and Student Financial Assistance Policies

University tuition fees can be defined and measured in a number of different ways. First, both universities and Statistics Canada often report university tuition fees as the average fees that full-time undergraduate arts and science students would pay (Statistics Canada 2007). Although Saskatchewan has not traditionally had differential tuition fees by program or level of study, in the late 1990s fees were increasingly

differentiated into tuition and ancillary fees, and thus it is vital to ensure that the figures used for tuition fees remain consistently measured throughout the relevant time period.

Although there are limitations to focusing solely on undergraduate arts and science students, it is possible – through Statistics Canada data and the fee schedules published by the two universities – to track tuition fees at the undergraduate level (excluding ancillary fees) between 1991 and 2004. These are the fees that are commonly reported on and addressed by the media, government, universities, and by students' unions themselves. Fees can be understood to increase, decrease, or stay the same from year to year.

Student financial assistance policies are more difficult to both define and operationalize within the Saskatchewan context. While recognizing that changes made to the federal component of the financial aid programs occur during the 1991 to 2004 period, this project focuses on the decisions made by the province – whether reacting to federal impulses or to other sources of pressure within the province. In the case of student loan program policy, the variable “policy change” will be operationalized to include changes in policy from year to year, with change defined as a difference from the status quo.

Changes could include an increase in funds for students, which may include the creation of a new program (such as programming for Northern students or single parents) or increased loan limits (whether tied to cost of living increases or as a reflection of other pressures). It could also include a reduction of the government's involvement in the program, which might include a reduction in loan amounts or the elimination/reduction of programming such as loans and bursaries. For example, the introduction of the Canada

Millennium Scholarship Foundation's funding in 1999 was used to replace provincial bursary money, which was then made part of the operating grants for universities. Additionally, a change in federal programming that was deliberately not matched with provincial changes – particularly after the programs were integrated – would be considered a decision not to change existing policy.

Status quo policy will involve the program remaining essentially the same, allowing for an increase in funds allocated for costs that are tied to the consumer price index or housing-related costs. These increases are not true changes in policy: rather, they are tied to annual assessments of the most basic costs built into student loan allocations.

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Public Opinion

Conceptualizing and operationalizing public opinion are fundamentally interconnected for this project. As noted earlier in this project, definitions of public opinion are often conflated with how it is measured. For example, “Proponents [of polls] view them as meaningful measures of public opinion” (Page 2006, 12). However, from a constructivist perspective of public opinion, other ways to assess public opinion must also be included. Therefore, the following measures have been included as ways to measure public opinion:

- Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces
- Letters to the Editor
- Talk radio: Commentators’ Opinions
- Talk radio: Callers

- Friends
- Family
- Communications from constituents/those you represented
- Polling commissioned by the provincial government
- Polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another)
- Polling made public by the media
- Media (in general)
- Interest/advocacy group communications
- Lobbyists' communications
- Election results
- Public protests and demonstrations
- Public consultations
- Other (respondents could fill in the blank).

As will be discussed later on in this chapter, these expressions of public opinion have been used in the Canadian and the American literature around both passive and active measures of opinion – as examples of mass public, active, elite, media, and interest group opinion.

Although the focus in this project is to examine the varied understandings of public opinion, there also needs to be a recognition that much public opinion is understood to be measured through public opinion polling. In Saskatchewan, public opinion measurement is operationalized through the government's Omnibus Polling, released every quarter since the beginning of 1992. In this case, public opinion is operationalized as the aggregated results of a randomly-selected and representative group

of Saskatchewan people's answers to political, social, and environmental questions, as will be discussed further in the next section.

Saskatchewan-specific polling results come from the Government of Saskatchewan's publicly-released quarterly polls, conducted between 1991 and 2004. When the NDP government, lead by Premier Roy Romanow, entered office in 1991, they proclaimed Freedom of Information legislation that had been introduced by the previous Conservative government. After considering this legislation, it was determined that quantitative public opinion research – polling – would need to be released to the public under the provisions of the Act and due to their governance goal of transparency. Thus, the new government created an informal policy to release publicly-funded polling results on a quarterly basis.¹⁴ With the exception of budget-related information, which is delayed before publication, and in periods of election readiness and campaigning, when polling was not undertaken, public opinion polling results have been released quarterly since 1991.

There are limitations to this information. First, questions around post-secondary education policy are not asked consistently and repeatedly throughout the time period of interest. This is partly reflective of changing governmental priorities over time, the creation and use of performance measures, and of changes in polling suppliers. Second, it has not been possible to access the original data files used to create the public opinion reports. Despite repeated requests submitted to the Department of Executive Council, it has not been possible to access these files. Key informants have suggested that in fact the

¹⁴ Although referred to by a number of key informants, this policy is not available in writing, has not been accessible to the public, and the specific details around what information is and is not releasable are not available.

government may never have received the data files – rather, pollsters may have submitted only the reports based on the data.¹⁵

Despite these limitations, however, there are positives associated with the data. First, questions asked at different points in time clearly indicate issues pertinent to government discussion and to policy decisions being made. Questions that are not repeated may themselves be useful indicators of public opinion and government (non) response. Second, Saskatchewan is one of the only provinces in Canada that actually releases this type of data on a regular basis – and some information may be better than no information.

The public opinion and public policy literature points to a number of descriptive factors around public opinion data that can impact agenda-setting and response to public opinion. The government polling will be assessed using these four factors. First, the direction and nuance of public opinion is important (Glynn et al 2006). Are people supportive of government's approach to post-secondary education funding? Second, the intensity of that opinion is vital. Is the majority of public opinion supportive of government's approach? Or does that opinion vary across the population?

Third, the stability of opinion over time matters. If the majority of the public is supportive of government's approach to public opinion funding, has that support remained over time or has it changed? Finally, information content – or knowledge – is an important element of assessing opinion polling (Glynn et al 2006). Is it possible to determine what people know about post-secondary education policy while also assessing their opinions of government's approach? This is an important limitation of the Saskatchewan data, as being unable to manipulate the original data to assess this level of

knowledge (when relevant questions are asked) makes this assessment largely impossible.

Data Sources

This project has three elements: 1) constructing the policy history for university tuition fees and student financial assistance policy in Saskatchewan, including the scope of and membership in the policy community, the policies themselves, and the range of expressions of public opinion; 2) a self-administered questionnaire for members of the policy community; and 3) a semi-structured telephone interview with respondents who completed questionnaires. This section focuses first on the construction of the policy history and then on the two research instruments: the self-administered questionnaire and the semi-structured interview.

As individual members of the policy community are the units of analysis, it was necessary to ensure that parts two and three of the research were consistent with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, and the project went through the ethics approval process at Carleton University. Ensuring that this project was guided by ethical principles was particularly important – and challenging – because of the researcher’s connections with the policy community in the province. Others have noted that although procedures may be in place to support ethical research, there is often an assumption “...that you go into a setting, that you don’t know the people who are there, that you study them, and get out. That’s the end of the relationship. When you develop friendships,... the ethical issues are much deeper and more complex” (Laurel Richardson, as cited in Ellis et al 2008, 272). The importance of adhering to

ethical conduct, including the need to ensure confidentiality for respondents, was often challenging.

Policy History

The policy history was constructed from a wide variety of sources. Government documentation, beginning with Annual Reports from both the relevant departments and the Student Aid Fund, provided a foundation for understanding government activity during this time. Budget documents – both Budget Speeches and Estimates of Expenditure – were used to track funds moving from the province to the universities. Annual Reports from the Universities of Regina and Saskatchewan also provided insight into the funds received from multiple levels of government and directly from students through fees. Data from Statistics Canada was used to help provide context for the policy history, providing evidence of expenditures, fees charged, enrolments, and other related items. Government documentation, including the interim and final reports of the various commissions held around post-secondary education generally – and university education in particular – were also an important part of understanding the policy developments and discussion around post-secondary education that took place during the relevant time period.

Books and articles written and published by academics and research institutes focusing on Saskatchewan were not plentiful during this time. However, those that dealt with Saskatchewan's experience were used to help supplement the policy history. Information on the issues being raised around post-secondary education was gathered through an assessment of articles published by the Regina Leader-Post and the Saskatoon

StarPhoenix. These articles supplemented – and complemented – the work published formally through government and other channels.

Relevant articles (including letters to the editor, editorials, and news items) were collected using a number of tools: online databases; microfilm/microfiche held by the University of Regina and the Saskatchewan Legislative Library; and existing collections of articles organized by theme held by the Saskatchewan Legislative Library.¹⁶ Full-text, searchable articles from the Regina Leader-Post for the year 2000 onward and the Saskatoon StarPhoenix from 1996 onward were available through ProQuest. Search terms used to gather articles included:

- Post-secondary education
- Education
- Tuition
- Student Aid
- Student Debt
- Student Loans
- Public opinion
- Opinion
- Public polling
- Public opinion polling

Articles gathered through this search process were incorporated into an excel spreadsheet, organized by year and newspaper with information on article authors, dates, and links.

Duplicates were removed from the file.

¹⁶ Conducted with assistance from Heather George, Michael Tesfarmariam, David Howland - all former graduate students with the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy.

For the years 1991 to 2000 for the Leader-Post and 1991 to 1996 for the StarPhoenix, article searches were done through microfilm/microfiche or through thematic archives at the Saskatchewan Legislative Library. For the Leader-Post, the years 1991 to 1999 were not indexed and therefore not easily searchable by key terms. However, the Legislative Library has indexed and microfilmed articles from the Leader-Post on post-secondary education for the years 1991 and 1992, which were accessible for this project. In addition, the Legislative Library has indexed and printed articles from the Leader-Post on post-secondary education for the years 1993 to 1999, which were also accessible for this project. Relevant articles accessed on microfilm/ microfiche were scanned and saved to cd at the University of Regina's library data centre. Because articles for these years were not indexed or searchable by key terms, this project relied on the archives at the Legislative Library.

Articles from the StarPhoenix for 1991 to 1995 were also available in different formats at the Legislative Library. The years 1991 to 1993 were indexed and microfilmed, and accessible for this project through the Saskatchewan Archives. As with the Leader-Post, the Legislative Library has indexed and printed articles from the StarPhoenix on post-secondary education for the years 1993 to 1999, which were also accessible for this project.

The thematic archives at the Legislative Library were vital in reconstructing media coverage of post-secondary education prior to 2000 as well as providing information about budgets and elections during the years 1991 to 2004. The Legislative Library staff conducted regular media scans that involved all Saskatchewan newspapers, both daily and weekly. The files relevant to this research included the following:

- Post-secondary education (1991 to 2004)
- University of Saskatchewan (1991 to 2004)
- University of Regina (1991 to 2004)
- Provincial Budget (1991 to 2004)
- Election (1991, 1995, 1999, 2003)
 - NDP (1991 to 2004)
 - Liberal (1991 to 2004)
 - Progressive Conservatives (1991 to 2004)
 - Saskatchewan Party (1997 to 2004)

These articles were used to reconstruct the discussion occurring (or not occurring) around post-secondary education, and particularly around university tuition fees and student loans. They were also used to assess the membership of the policy community, by analyzing the organizations and individuals represented in the content of the print media coverage. This analysis was also used to gain an understanding of the number of journalists covering post-secondary education-related issues in Saskatchewan during this time.

Finally, data from the Government of Saskatchewan's Omnibus Polling was used to help provide context around what the public deemed to be important during this time period, as well as how the public responded to questions around the quality of, access to, and costs of post-secondary education.

Research Instruments

Research Package

Once potential research participants were identified, they were provided with research packages by mail. They received a package containing a letter of introduction outlining the research project, what was being asked of them, the assessed risks and benefits of the research for participants; a self-administered questionnaire; a consent form; and a stamped return envelope for completed questionnaires (see Appendix A). In one case, where the potential participant lived in the United States, an international postage coupon was included that would cover the costs of returning the questionnaire. The external envelope (9 x 12) contained the Carleton University logo and my return address in the upper left-hand corner, a “Confidential” sticker in the lower left-hand corner, and the potential respondent’s address in the centre of the envelope. Carleton University letterhead – printed on a laser printer – was used for both the letter and the consent form.¹⁷

Letter of Introduction

The letter of introduction (included in Appendix A) was structured so as to meet the needs of the research ethics process, while ensuring that potential respondents had access to necessary information to support their decisions to participate or not (Goldstein 2002; Leech 2002). It outlined the nature of the project, which people were being approached as part of the interview process, for what purposes the research was being undertaken, and how potential respondents could contact both the researcher and the

¹⁷ Note that this may not meet the test of “professionally-produced letterhead” that many survey designers point to as important for establishing the professionalism of the project (Mangione 1995; Dillman 2007).

supervisor. It also included information on why potential participants should participate, and what benefits they – and others – would receive from the research (Bourque and Fielder 2003a; Bourque and Fielder 2003b).

Potential participants were asked to participate in two activities. The first activity was a short questionnaire, designed to assess participants' opinions about different forms of public opinion. Based on pre-testing, it was concluded that the questionnaire should take approximately ten minutes to complete. The second activity was a follow-up telephone interview, which was designed to take approximately thirty minutes to complete.

Consent Form

The consent form (included in Appendix A) included a space to indicate whether or not the participant agreed to be interviewed and when. If the section related to interview scheduling was not completed, it was considered an indication that the participant did not want to be interviewed. In some cases, respondents indicated in writing that they did not want to be interviewed.

In accordance with the literature on mail surveys, potential participants were provided with a deadline for responses, framed in terms of when interviews would be taking place. Knowing that this research was likely to take place over a span of several months, it seemed that including a series of moving dates for which interviews could be scheduled was a better option than providing a deadline in the first package and then changing the deadline for the follow-up packages (Dillman 2007).

Questionnaire

The self-administered questionnaire was designed to address the overall research questions, while providing additional demographic information. Once the questions were crafted, based in part on the literature and in part on the specific research questions and hypotheses, the draft questionnaire was pre-tested. The pre-testing process began with a critical assessment of the questions (Mangione 1995), through which it was determined that the questions met the needs of the research questions. Second, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review by Dr. Scott Bennett. Third, it was informally pre-tested by four people with a range of educational and employment backgrounds, who provided feedback on the ease of reading, ease of understanding, and timing around the questionnaire (Mangione 1995). Given the range of potential respondents who would be accessing the questionnaire, it was anticipated that small changes may need to be made to accommodate respondent feedback as the study progressed since a formal pre-test with potential respondents was not undertaken due to the small number of potential respondents.

The following questioning areas were included in the questionnaire:

- Q 1-2 Respondent's involvement in the policy community (member group and year(s) of membership)
- Q3 Current assessment of good measures of public opinion
- Q4 Importance of various measures of public opinion for policy-community-related work (assessment based on previous position)
- Q5 How often various measures of public opinion were consulted in policy-community-related work (assessment based on previous position)

- Q6a,b,c Assessment of existence and impact of public opinion in post-secondary education related policy areas (assessment based on previous position)
- Q7 Assessed importance of types of public opinion for decision makers (generally)
- Q8 Public opinion's value at various points in the policy making cycle for respondent
- Q9 Public opinion's value at various points in the policy making cycle for most policy actors
- Q10 Value of government-sponsored and publicly-released public opinion research
- Q11-13 Demographic information, including sex, ideology (on 7 point scale), and age
- Q14 Any additional comments/feedback

While many of the questions are considered standard (e.g. the demographic and ideology questions), others were created to reflect the constructivist approach to public opinion and the understanding of the public policy cycle. Further, some questions were created to assess the specific Saskatchewan context, such as those addressing the regular release of polling information in the province.

Questions 1 and 2 were included to assess in what capacity respondents were part of the post-secondary education policy community and over what time period. Although this research focuses on eight main groups of policy actors, this question was designed to further differentiate among those groups. Thus, the policy community membership question was divided into a series of subgroups that included interest groups: university

presidents and student union representatives; government: pollsters, ministers, ministerial staff, communications staff; opposition: pollsters, critics, staff; and media.

Interest groups include the student union representatives and university presidents, while government included deputy ministers, communications officials, senior civil servants, ministers, and public opinion researchers. Political parties included elected party representatives and public opinion researchers working for parties. Opposition groups included communications officials and official critics with responsibility for post-secondary education, while the media grouping included those working as journalists, reporters, or columnists. These questions served as a way to validate the lists of policy community members compiled for this project, and as variables necessary for data analysis. For analytical purposes, they were divided into eight groups.

Question 3 was designed to assess the value respondents generally placed on the various ways that public opinion (what the public is thinking about) could be measured. It reflects more than just the usual conflation of opinion and polling. Rather, this question uses a four-point scale (very good, somewhat good, not very good, not at all good) to assess how good a measure is at reflecting public opinion generally. The measures involved are the following:

- Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces
- Letters to the Editor
- Talk radio: Commentators' Opinions
- Talk radio: Callers
- Friends
- Family

- Communications from constituents/those you represented
- Polling commissioned by the provincial government
- Polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another)
- Polling made public by the media
- Media (in general)
- Interest/advocacy group communications
- Lobbyists' communications
- Election results
- Public protests and demonstrations
- Public consultations
- Other (respondents could fill in the blank).

These elements can all be considered ways to assess public opinion. Media opinion – whether through newspaper editorials or opinion pieces or general media coverage – can be considered a form of communication that can have an impact both on the public and on government (Page 2006; Butler 2007). Talk radio – particularly commentators' opinions – was separated out from general media because it has been considered part of the public opinion spectrum in the United States for some time, and may be considered a source of public opinion in Canada (Barker and Knight 2000; Pan and Kosicki 1997). Communications considered “active forms of opinion expression” – like letters to the editor, communications from constituents, callers into talk radio shows, public protests and demonstrations, participation in public consultations, and voting in elections – are measures of public opinion expressed by those who have an interest or focus on a

particular issue or policy area (Page 2006; Petry 2007; Rottinghaus 2007).¹⁸ Elite opinion – conceptualized to include friends and family, as well as lobbying and interest group communication – has been understood by many to have an impact on both policy makers and public policy (Page 2006; Petry 2007). Finally, passive forms of opinion – including polling, no matter who commissions or reports it – are probably the most commonly used measures of opinion.

A four-point scale (with a “not applicable” option) was chosen specifically to “force” respondents to make a judgment call about an item, without resorting to the middle point of the scale (Mangione 1995). The “not applicable” category was included to allow respondents who did not know or could not remember to have a way to opt out of the other response categories which also should help to eliminate “central tendency bias” (Mangione 1995). Although there are concerns about beginning-end list bias associated with a long list of these types of questions, analysis of the data received does not support concerns about the validity of this type of question in this project.

While Question 3 was designed to have respondents thinking about the various ways to measure public opinion, Question 4 was designed to assess how important the various forms of public opinion measurement were for respondents in their work within the policy community. For this question, respondents were provided with a four-point scale (very important, somewhat important, not very important, and not at all important) and an additional choice of not applicable if needed. As a reminder of the time period associated with the past, respondents’ identified position in the policy community (e.g. Deputy Minister with responsibility for post-secondary education, Student Union

¹⁸ Rottinghaus’ (2007) study of public opinion mail in the Johnson White House, for example, emphasized the importance of letters from constituents – particularly in the fact that the people who sent mail differed in the stability, consistency, and favourability of their opinions compared with the mass public.

President) were inserted into the questionnaire where respondents were being asked about past experiences. Research has shown that this helps eliminate recall bias, while stimulating respondents' memories of specific time periods (Mangione 1995).

Once the assessed importance of these types of public opinion measures was undertaken, respondents were asked to report how often they would have consulted these various measures in their positions in the policy community. Question 5 provides a four-point scale (very often, somewhat often, not very often, and rarely/never) with an additional choice of "not applicable" for assessing how often these measures would be consulted.

Question 6a is designed to evaluate whether or not respondents experienced a time where a majority of public opinion sources supported a particular policy or policy direction. The literature emphasizes the importance of issue salience when it comes to the impact of public opinion (Glynn et al 2006; Page and Shapiro 1983; Brooks 1990; Petry 1999), and this question attempts to assess whether or not there were particular times between 1991 and 2004 when issue salience was prominent in this area. Question 6b asks whether or not the respondent also supported moving in this policy direction, which can be used to assess the relationship between mass and elite opinion – and whether or not these policy elites' opinions were in line with the mass public opinion. Question 6c asks respondents to describe that situation in greater detail.

Using the same options as Questions 3, 4 and 5, Question 7 asks respondents about how important they think various expressions of public opinion are for decision-makers. While the previous questions were designed to focus on the value of various measures of public opinion and on their own use of those expressions of opinion, this

question asks specifically about respondents' opinions of public opinion use by decision-makers. As with Questions 3, 4 and 5, respondents were provided with a four-point scale (very important, somewhat important, not very important, and not at all important) and an additional choice of not applicable if needed.

Question 8 asks the respondents to think about their experiences with connection between the public policy cycle and public opinion. Respondents are asked at what point in the policy-making cycle public opinion was of most value. Assessed activities within the policy cycle include:

- Raising awareness about an issue (corresponding with agenda setting)
- Establishing the nature of the public discussion around that issue (corresponding with problem definition)
- Gathering evidence used to examine the issue (corresponding with policy formulation)
- Limiting the range of policy options available to decision-makers (corresponding with policy formulation)
- Shaping the communications around the resulting decision (part of implementation)
- Evaluation of the resulting policy or program (corresponding with evaluation)

For Question 8, response categories included very important, somewhat important, not very important, and not at all important.

While Question 8 focuses on the respondent's own opinion about the value of public opinion in the policy cycle, Question 10 asks about the respondent's opinion of the

value of public opinion in the policy cycle generally. The same activities and response categories are used as in Question 8.

Question 10 is designed to evaluate the respondent's assessment of the value of publicly-released Government of Saskatchewan polling. In Question 10a, respondents are asked whether or not having the public opinion polling released regularly has made the research more or less valuable. Question 10b provides an opportunity for the respondent to provide further clarification.

Finally, demographic questions 11, 12, and 13 collect information on sex (female or male), political ideology (on a seven-point scale), and current age (year of birth). Question 11, asking respondents to indicate whether they are female or male, is a commonly-used standard, although the response categories were placed alphabetically, with female before male.

Question 12, which assesses self-placement on the political spectrum, is also a standard question used to assess political ideology. Much research has shown that ideology is related to attitudes toward government spending (Converse 1964; Rudolph and Evans 2005). However, researchers have argued that the general public does not have a great understanding of this scale and that it does not truly reflect stable ideology over time, while multiple Likert scale measures may do so (Bartle 2000). Despite this argument, it was anticipated that people involved in a policy community – no matter what their role – would be more likely to be familiar with the left-right spectrum and their location on it than the general public would be.

Assessing age of respondents can be challenging in a questionnaire. While many respondents choose not to indicate their age in years, they are more likely to respond to

questions asking them about which age category they fit into or what year they were born (Dillman 2007; Trochim and Donnelly 2007). Thus, Question 13 asks respondents in what year they were born. The additional precision gained through asking respondents this question allows for analysis that includes the calculation of how old respondents were when they were actively involved in the policy community, which age ranges would not allow. Finally, Question 14 asked respondents if they had anything they wanted to add.

Although the questionnaire would optimally be supplemented by the telephone interview, it was also designed to stand alone if necessary. It was anticipated that some respondents may not choose to participate in an interview, so it was necessary to ensure that the vital primary information about opinions and attitudes toward public opinion and public opinion's role throughout policy making could be gathered even if an interview would not be scheduled.

Ensuring that the questionnaire was valid and reliable was vital for ensuring that the results could be used with confidence. The assessment of validity includes content validity, face validity, criterion validity, and construct validity. The questions incorporated into the questionnaire were designed out of the definitions of public opinion, policy actors, the policy process, and the policy community explored in Chapter 2, establishing content validity. Based on the questions and hypotheses proposed for this project, the questionnaire seems to “ask all the needed questions” (Fink 2003, 31). While research in this area, using these particular approaches, is limited, the questions were developed to include similar responses that had been tested in other work (Petry 2007; Sharpe 1999; Herbst 1995) – meeting the needs of criterion validity. Finally, construct

validity is ensured as the survey questions do distinguish between understandings of public opinion as well as its use by different groups of people (Fink 2003).

Challenges Associated with the Questionnaire

There were some challenges identified with question wording in the questionnaire. In a self-administered questionnaire, it is vital to ensure that wording is used that all respondents will understand and respond to (Mangione 1995). However, one respondent noted that some of the language seemed “jargony”, and could have been presented in plainer language.

Many note that elites – and other highly educated people – “...do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions” (Aberbach and Rockman 2002, 674). This became very clear through the additional comments many respondents provided on the questionnaire. A number focused particularly on the inadequacy of closed-ended questions for assessing their feedback, while also acknowledging the necessity of doing so.

Additionally, questionnaire design guides focus on the importance of professionalism of the questionnaire and package for response rates. Dillman (2007) in particular argues that double-sided questionnaires stapled at the top are less likely to be perceived as professional by potential respondents than those created in booklet-style. Although he notes that this is likely to be done to save on costs, it can have an impact on response rates. While I hope that this did not have as much of an impact on potential respondents in this project than it would on a respondent pool of the general public, it may in fact have had an impact on the way the project was perceived.

Interview

Throughout the construction of the questionnaire, it became clear that there would be questions beneficial to the overall contribution of this project that could not be answered well through a self-administered questionnaire. In order to explore questions about trade-offs between policy areas, the nature of the post-secondary education policy sector, and more experiential questions about respondents' work and experiences in the sector, the information gleaned through the questionnaire was supplemented with a semi-structured interview.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with questionnaire respondents who consented to be interviewed. A total of forty respondents participated in the interview process, from eight groups of policy actors. On average, the interview took 30 minutes, and ranged from 15 to 60 minutes in total. Interviews took place between April 28, 2006 and June 15, 2008. All interviews were conducted by myself, and all but two were digitally recorded for accuracy of transcription.¹⁹

Potential respondents were provided with a consent form as part of their survey package, which was returned in order to book a time and to consent to a telephone interview. All respondents consented to having their interviews recorded for transcription validation and any necessary clarifications. In two cases, the interviews were not recorded because of technical issues. Extensive notes were taken throughout the interview, and were incorporated into the transcription documents as researcher observations.

The interview originally consisted of a total of ten semi-structured questions. After completing ten interviews, an additional two questions were added to the interview

¹⁹ See discussion in Section 3.6.3 of this chapter around the recording.

to reflect issues that had come up throughout the first ten, and which were explicitly raised by one respondent. The questions were grouped into the categories of background, defining public opinion, experience with public opinion, and opinions around post-secondary education funding. Most included planned prompts, which were formally part of the interview protocol (Leech 2002). The questions included the following:

Background

- 1) Could you describe your background? (Education, previous work experience)
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: Types of employment the respondent had previous to the position(s) held that are of interest to this project.

Defining Public Opinion

- 2) How would you define public opinion?
 - What measures of public opinion did you find useful in your work as (an elected official, political staff member, etc.)? Why?
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: Talk radio (call-in shows), newspaper editorials, letters to the editor (provincial/city and local papers), friends/family, polling commissioned by government, polling commissioned by political party you belong to (if elected official or political staff),
 - What measures were not as useful? Why or why not?
 - PROMPT IF NECESSARY: Issues with polling in particular, e.g. the informed versus uninformed public.

Experience with Public Opinion

- 3) How often would you consult/observe public opinion, in its different forms?

- PROMPT IF NECESSARY FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS, ELECTED

OFFICIALS, POLITICAL STAFF: When you were involved in measuring/observing public opinion, how were survey questions determined? Did your department/branch do any of its own polling?

- 4) Can you think of a time when public opinion (in whatever form) was more influential than other times in this particular policy area?
- 5) Do you think polling would have more impact if the results did not have to be released, as it does in Saskatchewan?
- 6) Are there other forms of public opinion measurement that have become more popular because of this requirement?

- PROMPT IF NECESSARY: Is polling done in any other way, ie through the party machinery? Increased emphasis on focus groups or other qualitative measures that do not have to be released publicly?

Opinion Around Post-Secondary Education Funding (Tuition Fees and Student Financial Assistance – Student Loans)

- 7) What strategies might you use if you found there were gaps between public opinion and policies or policy intentions?
- 8) What role did you think that public opinion played in the decision-making process in this particular policy area?
- 9) Policy-making is often about making trade-offs. For example, health care, welfare, and education spending are often seen as competing for the same dollars. Do you think these trade-offs make post-secondary education policy a unique policy area re responsiveness? Why or why not?

- 10) Some have argued that young people such as university students are less likely to vote – does this have an impact on decision-makers' responsiveness to their opinions?
- 11) What other factors do you think impact policy formation in this area?
- 12) What role should public opinion play in policy formation?
- 13) Those are all of the questions I have for you today. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything that you'd like to add?

After providing a re-introduction to the focus and scope of the interview, Question 1 asked respondents about their education and previous work experience, in order to open up the interview and provide some context for where respondents are situated. While this approach of asking respondents about themselves at the beginning of an interview is not always advocated (see Leech 2002, for example), the question seemed to be well-received by respondents in this project.

The issue of public opinion and public policy was introduced in Question 2 by having the respondent define public opinion in his/her own words. Respondents were asked about the measures of public opinion that were useful to them in their relevant policy community work. If necessary, respondents were prompted with references to talk radio (call-in shows), newspaper editorials, letters to the editor (provincial/city and local papers), friends/family, polling commissioned by government, and polling commissioned by political party you belong to (if elected official or political staff). Respondent was then asked which measures were not as useful, or if there were issues with certain kinds of measures in particular. They would be prompted with various measures if unsure.

Question 3 asked respondents how often they would consult or observe public opinion in various forms. If respondents were public servants, elected officials, or political staff, they would be asked how government survey questions were determined and whether or not the department/branch they worked with did any of its own polling.

In order to assess the relative value of different measures or expressions of public opinion, Question 4 asked about influential public opinion. Respondents were asked whether there was a time when public opinion was more influential than at other times in this particular policy area.

Question 5 began with a statement about the Saskatchewan government policy to regularly release its public opinion polling results quarterly. Then respondents were asked whether they thought the results of the Saskatchewan government polling would have more or less impact if they were not released regularly, and were prompted to elaborate if they answered yes or no.

As a follow-up to Question 5, Question 6 asked whether there were other forms of public opinion measurement that have become more popular and/or more commonly used because of the requirement to release public opinion polling results. If necessary, respondents were prompted by asking if polling was done in any other way, or whether there was an increased emphasis on focus groups or other qualitative measures (for example) that did not have to be released publicly.

To address the use of public opinion by members of the policy community, respondents were asked in Question 7 if there were particular strategies they might have used (or that might have been used by others) if there were gaps between public opinion

and policies or policy intentions. Question 8 then asked respondents to assess the role played by public opinion in the decision-making process, and what that role should be.

Questions 9 and 10 were designed to assess respondents' perceptions of the impact of other factors affecting policy-making in this particular policy area.

Respondents were asked in Question 9 whether or not this particular policy area was unique in terms of responsiveness, and why or why not it may or may not be unique. The question was prefaced by the statement that policy making is often characterized by the need to make trade-offs, particularly when dealing with a budget heavily weighted toward health care. Question 10 focused on the importance of key publics for policy-making, and which public would be important within this sector – particularly whether the age of the public would be important (Fafard 1996; O'Neill 2001). To assess whether or not respondents perceived that the fact that many students are young and post-secondary education seems to be marginalized in policy-making, they were asked whether the fact that many university students are young people and that young people are less likely to vote has an impact on the influence of public opinion (and this particular public).

Question 11 asked respondents what other factors they may perceive as important in terms of policy formation in this particular policy area. The penultimate question (12) focused on the role that public opinion should play in policy formation: a reflection of the question that early respondents had raised about the connection between public opinion and public policy. Finally, respondents were asked if they had anything else to add, or if they felt that there was something missing from the interview process

Data Collection Procedures

Information gained from key informants is key to addressing the research questions and the hypotheses of this project. In order to gain the best information possible, two instruments were used: a self-administered questionnaire and a follow-up semi-structured telephone interview. Before beginning the applied research, data collection procedures were developed for the self-administered questionnaire and the telephone interview. Once potential respondents had been identified and provided an initial research package, second and third follow-up contacts were made if necessary.

Data Collection Plan

For both the questionnaire and the interview, potential respondents were identified using a series of informational sources including government directories, university press releases, student union directories, print media coverage, annual reports (university and government), government and political party press releases, and information provided by relevant organizations. In a very few cases, respondents being interviewed provided the name of a person who could provide additional information for the project.

The Cabinet Ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education policy were identified through the Government of Saskatchewan directory, while those holding office between 2000 and 2004 were identified through departmental annual reports. Once their names were identified, current contact information was gleaned through Google searches, Canada 411 searches, and Government of Saskatchewan electronic directory

searches. Of the ten Ministers identified, all were contactable by mail.²⁰ In six cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses – often at the Legislative Assembly, as many were still members of the Assembly. Questionnaire packages for the other four former Ministers were sent to their home addresses.

Given that a number of former PSE Ministers were still members of the Legislative Assembly – and Cabinet Ministers with responsibility for multiple portfolios – it was very difficult to access them because of time constraints. Although a number participated in this research in the early stages of interviewing, more became available post-November 2007 because of the change in government.

Between 1991 and 2004, there were approximately thirty Senior Ministerial Assistants (MAs) in offices responsible for post-secondary education. The MAs employed between 1991 and 2000 were identified through the Government of Saskatchewan directory, while those employed between 2000 and 2004 were identified through discussions with ministerial and departmental staff. Once their names were identified, current contact information was gleaned through Google searches, Canada 411 searches, and Government of Saskatchewan electronic directory searches. Of the thirty Ministerial Assistants identified, fifteen were contactable by mail. In all fifteen cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses.

However, former Ministerial Assistants were very unlikely to take part in the survey. Of the fifteen former MAs contacted for this project, only two returned their questionnaires and were willing to participate in an interview. There are a number of possible ways to explain this limited response rate. First, for those former MAs who were still working for government, either in Ministerial offices or within the public

²⁰ One former Minister passed away during the course of the research project.

service, the environment post-2006 became heavily politicized. In the lead up to an election, the polarization – and conflict – between the two main parties became more pronounced. People may well have wanted to remain uninvolved with a project that may be seen as politicized.²¹ Second, many former Ministerial Assistants have moved on to different types of employment, in which they may not want to be associated with their previously politicized work. Third, many of the former Ministerial Assistants were women, and I found that women were more challenging to locate because of family name changes. Finally, as with other potential respondent groups, former Ministerial Assistants may have had concerns about their abilities to recall their experiences – many of which were in relatively short-term employment. Thus, analysis involving this group is limited.

Information on the Deputy, Assistant Deputy, Associate Deputy, Executive Directors, and Directors in government and the portfolios they managed was gathered from the Government of Saskatchewan telephone directories (up to the year 2000) and confirmed through searches in Hansard and media coverage. Information post-2000 was gathered strictly through searches in Hansard and information contained in the departments' annual reports. Once their names were identified, current contact information was gleaned through Google searches, Canada 411 searches, and Government of Saskatchewan electronic directory searches. Of the twenty-five officials identified for the period 1991 to 2004, mailing addresses were identifiable for all. In fourteen cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses. Questionnaire packages for the other eleven former senior officials were sent to their home addresses.

²¹ This concern about politicization was justified for many, as a number of former Ministerial Assistants were among the first fired when the Saskatchewan Party took office in November 2007.

Information on the post-secondary education critics prior to 2001 was gathered through Hansard records, media coverage, and the occasional press release contained in the Legislative Library's records. In total, three critics from the Saskatchewan Party and the Liberals were identified during the relevant period. Once their names were identified, current contact information was gleaned through Google searches, Canada 411 searches, and Government of Saskatchewan electronic directory searches. Of the official critics identified for the period 1991 to 2004, all were contactable by mail. In three cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses, including the Legislative Assembly and/or Constituency Offices. A questionnaire package for the other former official critic was sent to the former critic's home address.

Gaining responses from this group of policy actors was challenging. As with the former Ministerial Assistants, many of these actors had either moved into other political positions (with federal parties or with lobby/interest groups) or were still Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). The time frame used for contacting these former official critics coincided with a politically-charged time in government, followed by the election of the opposition Saskatchewan Party and their transition into government. Given this issue, it became necessary to gather data around the impact of the opposition – and its potential importance as a measure or demonstrator of public opinion – in other ways. Although not ideal, media coverage that included information from the opposition and Hansard's records of opposition questions in Question Period as well as their participation in House Committees was used to determine when, how, and on what issues the opposition was active.

Between 1991 and 2004, the students' unions at the two universities were often divided in their approach to student issues, in their relationships with university administration, and in their national-level umbrella organization membership. The University of Saskatchewan Students' Union left the Canadian Federation of Students and helped to found the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations in 1995, while the University of Regina held continuous membership in the Canadian Federation of Students throughout the 1991 to 2004 period.²² Although at times they have found common ground and worked together, those times were exceptions rather than the norm. Despite these on-off relationships, for analytical purposes the students' unions and national umbrella organizational representatives will be treated as one interest group.

Both the students' unions were contacted in an attempt to identify the presidents active between 1991 and 2004. The University of Saskatchewan supplied all names, although the University of Regina did not respond to a series of requests for information. Additional University of Regina Students' Union presidential information was gained through the Canadian Federation of Students' Annual Directory and through media coverage in the Saskatoon StarPhoenix and Regina Leader-Post. Once the names of the former student union representatives were identified, current contact information was gleaned through Google searches, Canada 411 searches, and Government of Saskatchewan electronic directory searches. Of the twenty-five student union representatives identified for the period 1991 to 2004, nineteen were contactable by mail and not part of the potential respondent list for other policy community groups.²³ In all cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses. In the cases where former student

²² Despite the URSU referendum to withdraw from the CFS in 1998.

²³ In the cases where potential respondents appeared on several lists, the most recent policy community group was used for their selection criteria.

union representatives were also holding other roles in the policy community (e.g. senior government officials, elected officials), the latter-held role would be the one of interest for this project. Given the mobility of this group of people, there were a number for whom contact information could not be found. In total, five former presidents from the two campuses could not be contacted.

Between 1991 and 2004 the University of Regina had three presidents and the University of Saskatchewan had two presidents. Once the names of the presidents (former and current) were identified, current contact information was gleaned through Google searches and Canada 411 searches. Of the university presidents identified for the period 1991 to 2004, mailing addresses were available for all five. In three cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses. Questionnaire packages for the other two former university presidents were sent to their home addresses.

Identifying which journalists to include was challenging. Between 1991 and 2004, the Saskatoon StarPhoenix had a journalist assigned specifically to university affairs. However, other journalists also provided some coverage of post-secondary education that related to the issues of student financing and tuition fees. The Regina Leader-Post did not have a dedicated journalist for post-secondary education issues, but did offer coverage – more limited than that of the StarPhoenix – that involved a number of journalists.

These journalists were all identified through an assessment of articles on post-secondary education in the two newspapers during the relevant time period, gained through database searches and file searches at the Legislative Library. Once the names of the journalists who had written stories about post-secondary education were identified,

current contact information was gleaned through Google searches, Canada 411 searches, and Government of Saskatchewan electronic directory searches. Of the twenty-eight journalists identified for the period 1991 to 2004, twenty-six were contactable by mail. In all cases, the addresses used were workplace addresses.

Responses from the journalists identified for this project were few. A number replied that they had had very little to do with post-secondary education, and that they did not trust their memories to be accurate. Two were leaving or had just left for parental leave during the time of interviewing. Two packages were returned unopened.

Questionnaire

Once ethics approval was received from Carleton University, data collection began in spring 2006. Packages were sent out to potential respondents, and the initial completed questionnaires were received beginning in March 2006. Where respondents had indicated their willingness to take part in a telephone interview, interviews were scheduled and undertaken. In a limited number of cases, interviews had to be rescheduled a series of times in order to accommodate the respondent's and researcher's schedules.

Much of the literature around mail surveys emphasizes the importance of reminders to ensure that the response rate is maximized, and that the sample is as representative as possible (Dillman 2007; Mangione 1995). Thus, for this project, potential respondents were provided with an initial package, containing a letter outlining the project, a consent form, a self-administered questionnaire, and a stamped response envelope. Instead of providing a follow-up postcard or reminder notice, a second

complete package was mailed out approximately one month after the first package was distributed. The cover letter was altered slightly to reflect the fact that this was a follow-up package (see Appendix A). Finally, a third package was sent out as a reminder.

Mail-outs were staggered in time, with different amounts of time elapsing between mailings for different groups of potential respondents. For example, the time that elapsed between mail-outs for student union representatives differed from the time between mail-outs for elected officials, to reflect the fact that the Legislature was in session or that there was a provincial (or federal) election underway. The timing of mail-outs and of returns was tracked in a spreadsheet. Respondents who had returned completed questionnaires – many of which were returned with consent forms, identifying them – were removed from the follow-up mailing lists.

Interviews

Conducted only with those respondents who expressed a willingness to take part and a signed consent form, telephone interviews were scheduled to meet the needs of both researcher and respondent. In all but two cases, they were digitally recorded in order to ensure accurate transcription. However, the quality of the recordings varied substantially, and approximately 40% of total recorded time was not usable. As a back-up resource, extensive notes were taken in order to supplement the transcribed audio. All interviews were conducted by myself through the telephone. The semi-structured format of the interview was followed, to ensure that respondents provided the information required to address the research questions identified for the project.

Data Collection Challenges

As the research with participants – both self-administered questionnaires and telephone interviews – took place over two years, particular challenges arose in keeping the research organized and in ensuring that there were limited environmental factors that could influence the results of the research and/or participation of potential respondents. In order to address these challenges, organizational structures were put into place to manage the in-coming and out-going research packages in order to manage follow-up communications – both reminder packages and responses from research participants.

Because there was often differing amounts of time allocated between introductory packages and follow-up packages, I assumed that follow-up packages would be treated – at least partly – as new requests for information. Additionally, addresses were checked before each mail-out to ensure that the information remained current and reflected changes in position (eg. from elected majority to opposition, or retirements from positions).

Completion Rates

Understanding who has participated – and who has not – is vital for ensuring that error (nonresponse bias) is minimized as much as possible (Goldstein 2002). Goldstein (2002) argues that “researchers often focus too much on the total number of nonrespondents and less on the degree to which nonrespondents are likely to differ from those sampling units who are successfully contacted and interviewed” (670). The rates at which respondents participated in the questionnaire and interview portions of the research project are presented in Tables 3.2a and 3.2b.

Table 3.2a: Completion Rates Among Groups for Questionnaires

Group	Total Population Identified	No Contact/ Could not find/ Packages Returned/ Duplications	Questionnaire		
			Total Completed	Clear Refusals	Completion Rate
Ministers	8	1	3		43%
Associate Ministers	2		0		0%
Opposition	5	1	0		0%
Ministerial Assistants	30	15	2		13%
DMs	5	2	2		67%
Associate DMs	2	0	2		100%
Assistant DMs	8	0	2		25%
EDs/Directors	17	2	6		40%
U of R Presidents	3		2		67%
U of S Presidents	2		1		50%
USSU Presidents	13	3	4		40%
URSU Presidents	12	4	2		25%
CFS-Sask	14	6	5		63%
Media	28	2	3	3	13%
Public Opinion Researchers/ Pollsters	3	2		1	66%

Note: Completion rate for questionnaires was calculated as follows: (completed questionnaires/[total population – no contacts])*100%

Table 3.2b: Completion Rates Among Groups for Interviews

Group	Total Completed: Questionnaire	Interviews			
		Total Completed	Refusals	No contact	Completion Rate
Ministers	3	3	0	0	100%
Associate Ministers	0				
Opposition	0				0%
Ministerial Assistants	2	2	0	0	100%
DMs	2	1	1		50%
Associate DMs	2	0		2	0%
Assistant DMs	2	1	1		50%
EDs/Directors	6	6			100%
U of R Presidents	2	2			100%
U of S Presidents	1	1			100%
USSU Presidents	4	3		1	75%
URSU Presidents	2	2			100%
CFS-Sask	5	5			100%
Media	3	2		1	66%
Public Opinion Researchers/ Pollsters		2			100%

Note: Completion rate for interviews: completed interviews/total participants returning questionnaires*100% Interview refusals were based on the number of respondents who had completed questionnaires but were unwilling to participate in an interview.

* Duplication of respondents is accommodated here.

Data Entry and Transcription Processes

Questionnaires

Data from the first 32 questionnaires was entered into an Excel file, and then transferred into SPSS 14.0 for data analysis. Any questionnaires received after the first 32 had been entered were entered directly into SPSS. In both the SPSS and the Excel files, responses to open-ended questions were entered verbatim in string format, while responses to closed-ended questions were entered as coded on the questionnaire. Any issues with data entry were recorded, and after the 32 questionnaires were entered, these issues were addressed uniformly. With the open ended questions on the questionnaire, attribution will be to one of the eight groups of participants (e.g. elected official, interest group, etc.) rather than to an individual.

Interviews

The completed interviews were transcribed between May 30 and June 15, 2008. For this particular project, the focus was on the content of the respondents' responses, rather than on the actual delivery of the responses. Thus, the responses themselves were transcribed without including more detailed information about how these responses were delivered, such as whether the respondent paused between/within responses or the researcher's perceptions of the interview.

As interviews were transcribed, coding schemes were developed – building on the factors informally identified during the interview design period (Berry 2002). Responses to open-ended questions were aggregated and coded thematically into categories, based on the research question they relate to. In some cases, respondents

provided information for one question that applied to a number of other questions. In these cases, the information was noted and moved to the appropriate place for analysis. Once the thematic coding structures were created, information from the interviews was coded appropriately and entered into an SPSS 14.0 file for analysis.

As per ethics approval, the digital recordings of the completed interviews are kept on computer hard drive with a cd back-up. Notes are stored in a locked filing cabinet. This original data is accessible only to Andrea Rounce and Dr. Scott Bennett. Five years after completing the project, the data will be destroyed.

Triangulation

Information obtained in questionnaires and interviews was verified, as much as possible, by using government documentation and other secondary sources. In some cases, particularly around respondents' perceptions of the importance of particular measures of public opinion, it is not possible to externally validate the information provided. However, it is possible to ensure that the information provided around important opinion-policy events was as consistent with possible with the timeframe respondents were active in the policy community. Sources used to create the policy history were used to help verify timeframes, type of policy activity, and some measures of public opinion discussed by respondents. While it is vital to remember that these sources are not unbiased sources of information (Thomas 2003), they do provide an additional way to examine the historical developments associated with this project.

Data and Recruitment Challenges

There were a number of challenges associated with recruitment of potential respondents and of the data collection process. Some of these have been identified previously in Section 3.6, with regard to particular subgroups of the sample. Others are more general, and apply more broadly to all potential respondents.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Saskatchewan is a small province with a small and tightly-knit policy community. Once recruitment of potential respondents began, it became clear how small the community really was. For example, many of the former student union representatives and ministerial assistants were now employed with the provincial government. Many of the previous Ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education were still elected representatives, with or without cabinet positions. Many of the previous Critics were also still elected representatives. Thus, it is possible that a number of potential respondents chose not to participate because they did not want to be connected with their previous employment or they did not feel they were in a position to comment freely on their previous experiences because of their current responsibilities. This was particularly clear when early respondents were more likely to be those retiring from politics or their current positions or those who had moved on to different (often non-Saskatchewan-based) employment. After the election of Fall 2007 changed the governing landscape of the province and non-respondents were re-contacted, some previous non-responders were willing to participate.

Additionally, there were challenges to be addressed around respondents' perceptions that they could adequately recollect their experiences around public opinion and policy. After having completed the questionnaire, two respondents raised concerns

about their abilities to fully reconstruct their experiences from the early 1990s and chose not to participate in the interview process. An additional potential respondent – a former print journalist working in the province – noted that as a journalist not assigned specifically to post-secondary education exclusively, he/she was not in a good position to speak to the issues.

Additionally, because the policy community in the province is quite small, even the respondents were talking about the research amongst themselves.²⁴ While there was no evidence that they were comparing responses before being interviewed, they were comparing interviewing experiences.

Data Analysis Strategy

One of the weaknesses with approaching the opinion-policy relationship in this way is that it is not open to some of the more usual means of statistical analysis often used in this type of research. One is unlikely to be able to run a statistically significant series of correlations, for example, between policies and opinion, given the small sample. However, it still seems a worthy pursuit to look more carefully at particular cases, in the attempt to shed some light on the policy-opinion relationship in an under-researched area of study. As such, a combination of univariate and bivariate analysis is used, drawing on frequency distributions with significance testing, and cross-tabulations.

²⁴ I heard from a number of respondents that they had been discussing my work, once they had determined amongst themselves that they each had been interviewed. Laura R. Woliver (2002) points to the challenge that this can face in research with high profile political activists, since interviewees "...can let each other know about less-than-satisfactory experiences with a researcher" (677).

This project was designed to draw both from quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques, bringing them together to help answer the research questions and test hypotheses (Thomas 2003; Greene 2008; Bryman 2007). The mixed methods approach is understood to be "...an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research but also offers a powerful third paradigm choice that often will provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results" (Johnson et al 2007, 129).

Combining these two types of analysis ensure that the questions that can be answered using numbers – how many respondents rely on or value various measures of public opinion – along with the responses focused on respondents' opinions, such as those that ask how respondents understand public opinion and the utility of government-sponsored polling in their own words. The results of the two types of analysis will be present as an "integrated data display", which will allow cross-method comparisons (Lee and Greene 2007).

As well as the analytical rationale for taking this approach, there is a particularly important reason to do so for confidentiality purposes. The Saskatchewan policy community is a small, interconnected one, with a great deal of overlap and interaction among the community groups. As such, using direct quotations in the dissertation text is likely to mean that readers would recognize who said what. Many respondents asked about how their words would be used, and expressed concerns about the use of direct quotations because of the ability to recognize people in such a small community. Thus, it was important to be clear about aggregating responses, and coding them with descriptions rather than using respondents' words directly.

The results of the primarily quantitative piece – the questionnaire – are designed to be presented first, to provide context for the more detailed qualitative analysis associated with both the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and of the interview. This ensures that the qualitative data can be used in “...interpreting, clarifying, and validating quantitative results” (Johnson et al 2007, 115). The qualitative and quantitative information can be used in complementary analysis, strengthening the findings and minimizing the weaknesses each type of information brings (Johnson et al 2007). However, there are challenges associated with bringing together “objective information” – such as that gathered through the documentary analysis work – with the more “constructivist” view of actors’ use, experience with, and perspectives on public opinion and public policy (Bryman 2007). Thus, it becomes particularly important to be clear about the purpose and complementarity of the various kinds of information.

As part of the dissemination process associated with the analysis, a summary of findings was provided to participants in the project.

Conclusions

This project is designed to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between public opinion and public policy from the perspective of members of the policy community. Based around a case study of university tuition fee and student loan policy in Saskatchewan between the years 1991 and 2004, the components of the project – the policy history, the self-administered questionnaire for policy community members, and the semi-structured telephone interview with policy community members – are designed to provide different “lines of sight” on the problem (Berg 2001, 4).

Focused on the individual policy actor as the unit of analysis, the policy community for the applied research includes eight groups of people: elected officials (Cabinet Ministers with Responsibility for Post-Secondary Education and Official Opposition Critics), senior Ministerial Assistants; Deputy Ministers; senior civil servants (Associate and Assistant Deputy Ministers, Executive Directors, and Directors); media (journalists); public opinion researchers (pollsters); and interest groups (university Presidents and students' union representatives). Individual members of these groups were identified, provided with research packages, and in many cases completed both questionnaires and interviews. Although there were challenges around recruitment in this project, the data gathered from questionnaires and from interviews is both reliable and valid for this type of exploratory analysis.

Conceptualizing and operationalizing the variables public opinion and public policy, as well as the strengths and limitations of the measurement tools available, provide an important context for discussion of the data sources in greater detail. Using a mixed methodology – one that includes a policy history, a questionnaire, and a telephone interview – requires an integrative analysis, one which draws from the three types of methods in order to maximize benefits and minimize error associated with the three independently. This analysis will be presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. In Chapter 4, the Policy History – the construction of the public policy and public opinion developments throughout the 1991 to 2004 period – provides the historical context within which the situate the analysis. Chapters 5 and 6, the Policy Community Findings, are based on the outcomes of the questionnaire and interview, while also integrating the measures from the policy history.

CHAPTER 4

SASKATCHEWAN POLICY HISTORY

Introduction

Creating a policy history – including an analysis of how the student loan and university tuition fee policies shifted over time and the shape and nature of public opinion around post-secondary education funding – provides a useful way of appreciating what happened during the 1991 to 2004 period in order to better examine the links between public opinion and public policy. Further, understanding how the student loan and university tuition fee policy is situated within a larger political, educational, and economic context is vital for the ability to understand the role that public opinion may have in impacting those policy developments, vis-à-vis other forces.

This chapter describes the state of post-secondary education funding in the province just prior to and throughout the 1991-2004 period. Each four year term between elections is discussed with a focus on tuition fee policy, provincial government priorities and major shifts in student financial aid policy, government-sponsored investigations into post-secondary education, activities of the members of the policy community, the importance of the inter-relationship between government(s) and the universities, and public opinion around post-secondary education policy and spending. Additionally, while this project focuses on public policy at the provincial level, it is impossible to ignore the impact on the province of actions taken by the federal government in terms of fiscal retrenchment, cuts to transfer payments, and changes in

federal student loan programming. Thus, the most important changes are considered part of the policy environment. Public opinion during each term – measured primarily through government-sponsored public opinion polling – is explored. In addition, a focus on the promises made during election campaigns is included.

There are challenges associated with chronological presentation: while the provincial government's fiscal year runs from April until March, the student loan fund fiscal year has been run both on a calendar year and on the government's fiscal year. For students receiving loans, the "loan year" runs from September until August. The department responsible for post-secondary education reported on a July to June academic year until the late 1990s, at which point it switched to a fiscal year reporting mechanism. In addition, the universities have both a fiscal year that matches the government's fiscal year, an academic year which runs from September to August, and an employment year that runs from July to June. Finally, government-commissioned polling was almost never released in the same month that it was conducted. As a result, polling results are dated for the time period in which they were collected, rather than when they were released to the public in the understanding that they would have been made available to Cabinet soon after data collection.

***University Financing and Student Financial Assistance Under Premier Grant Devine
1982 to October 1991: Setting the Scene for Transition to New Democratic Party
Rule***

Throughout its 1982 to 1991 tenure, the Progressive Conservative-led government made four prominent shifts in post-secondary education policy. First, it focused primarily on the need for skilled labour, and the role that education and training

would play in meeting the needs of the labour market. Second, many have argued that it both misunderstood and mistreated the universities. Universities seemed less tangibly connected to the economic well-being of the province than other post-secondary institutions, they did not have the deepest public support, and they were perceived to be inflexible and non-responsive to the needs of the labour market (Fairbairn 1991). These perceptions led to serious financial pressures, due to virtually fixed operating grants.

Despite these concerns, the government's third shift was to encourage both increased enrolment and increasing tuition fees in the universities through labour market policies and decreasing support for the universities. Throughout this period, increases in operating grants for the universities had been negligible, and universities had responded by capping enrolments in particular programs and raising tuition fees – signaling a battle of wills between government and the universities. Fourth, the Progressive Conservative government oversaw the restructuring of the student loan program, moving it from one of the most generous to one of the most expensive for individual borrowers, in part because of its move from bursaries to largely repayable loans. The provincial government also brought the provincial program in line with the federal program, ensuring that students must borrow the maximum before benefitting from any provincial bursaries. Student debt increased among Saskatchewan students, particularly from 1986 onward. In order to address concerns about increasing debt, those who were particularly needy were able to access the Remission Program and the newly-created Interest Relief Plan (Saskatchewan Education 1989).²⁵ During this time, the relationships among members of the policy community became increasingly

²⁵ Saskatchewan students who qualified for loan remission would receive remission based on both their CSLP and their SSLP loans; thus the province was essentially making payments on federal debt.

antagonistic, particularly among the students' unions, university administrations, and government.

October 1991 Election: Policy Platforms and Public Opinion

Building up to a highly acrimonious October 1991 election, the three main political parties – the Progressive Conservatives (PC), the Liberals, and the New Democratic Party (NDP) – focused primarily on economic development and job creation in a period of economic downturn. After two terms in government, the PCs were facing imminent defeat – despite their continuing support in the rural areas (Spencer 2007). With the focus on economic development and job creation, very little attention was paid to education – and even less to post-secondary education in particular.

The public – and perceptions of public opinion – played an important role in the 1991 election. Evidence demonstrated that the PCs were highly concerned by the public's perceptions of their motivations and potential actions. According to a leaked copy of the PC campaign strategy, “the Tories must change “the public's perception of our motives from ‘for political gain’ to ‘doing what's best for Saskatchewan's economic future’” (Mandryk 1991, A4). Other media questioned the use of public opinion in decision-making processes, such as that undertaken in Consensus Saskatchewan²⁶, and in the PC-proposed referenda and plebiscites. According to a Moose Jaw Times Herald Editorial of September 24, 1991,

²⁶ Consensus Saskatchewan was a government-appointed group of 100 citizens (largely drawn from industry) which addressed questions around Saskatchewan's economic and fiscal future.

...Asking citizens for their input on various issues is a concept with merit... as long as the process isn't intended as a cop-out by those we elect to make decisions. If the seekers of the public opinion put the results of task forces and public forums to good use – rather than preparing reports that will only collect dust on some out-of-the-way shelf – the process can be justified....Frankly, taxpayers have enough to pay for without picking up the tab for frivolous task forces, plebiscites, and referendums (4).

Various post-secondary education interest groups advertised during the 1991 election campaign, in an attempt to appeal to the public for support. However, despite some discussion around funding for post-secondary education, support for students individually and for institutions collectively was not a predominant election issue. After an all-party post-secondary education panel at the University of Saskatchewan mid-campaign, University of Saskatchewan Students' Union president Doug Rain noted that "the lack of emphasis on education throughout the campaign was evident in candidates' answers to questions" (Marud 1991c, A3).

With a voter turnout of 81 per cent, the NDP gained 55 of 66 seats in the Legislative Assembly, compared with 10 PCs and 1 Liberal (leader Lynda Haverstock). The stage was set for a transformation in approaches to governance, and to a major transformation in how Saskatchewan's economy was perceived and managed – including how and where money was spent for post-secondary education. However, the transformation was not the one that most people had anticipated.

University Financing and Student Financial Assistance Under NDP Premier Roy Romanow – November 1991 to 1995

With the election of a majority NDP government in late October of 1991, many expected that funding for social programming – including post-secondary education – would be revived after long years of limited increases. However, the devastating

financial situation of the province meant that the province went into a period of extreme fiscal restraint (Muir 1997, 99). The first four years of a three-term government were characterized by a focus on economic recovery and job creation; federal retrenchment which impacted transfer payments to the provinces; provincial retrenchment which included scaled back operational funding for universities; structural changes to the governance of post-secondary education; substantive tuition fee increases at both universities; and an official review of the state of Saskatchewan's universities, led by a prominent civil servant.

Government Spending on Universities and Tuition Fees

The importance of economic growth for the province, in an era in which government faced outright bankruptcy, could not be underestimated. The government's first budget (1992-93) made it clear that all areas of social spending would be affected while government focused on job creation and a strengthened economy. University operating funds were cut, but not nearly as deeply as had been anticipated. Tuition fee increases followed cuts to the universities' operating grants in 1992-93, with the University of Saskatchewan increasing overall fees by 13.1 per cent (Yanko 1992b) and the University of Regina increasing tuition by 13 per cent, along with introducing other fee increases and programming/service cuts (Blevins 1992; University of Regina Board of Governors 1992).

Concerned about the state of Saskatchewan universities, the government established the University Program Review Panel, chaired by former Saskatchewan Deputy Minister of Finance and former President of the Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation Dr. Albert Johnson in early 1992. Reporting in March 1993, the Panel reinforced that Saskatchewan's universities were distinctive, should have their governance structures revisited, pointed to their contributions to the economy, and emphasized the importance of ensuring accessibility for Saskatchewan students (University Program Review Panel 1993; Kyle 1993b).

The 1993-94 budget again cut the universities' operating grants, with additional cuts of 4 per cent announced for 1994-95 (Saskatchewan Finance 1993). Making connections between skills developed through education and the labour market were reflected in the new Department of Education, Training, and Employment (Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment 1993a). The fiscal situation for post-secondary education in the province was worsened in the fall of 1993 when the federal government announced cuts to transfer payments, decreasing the amount of funds the province could anticipate in support of social programs (Canada News Facts 1993).

Despite consistent messaging from the university presidents and the students' unions and public demonstration, tuition fees increased at both universities in 1993-94 as well: 9.1 per cent at the University of Regina and 8.3 per cent at the University of Saskatchewan (Moose Jaw Times Herald 1993; University of Regina Board of Governors 1993). In 1994, preparations for the anticipated tuition fee increases at both universities were well underway by the time the provincial budget was released. Soon after the provincial budget speech, both universities increased tuition fees: University of Regina by 6.4 per cent and University of Saskatchewan by 7 per cent.

The end of the financial retrenchment was signaled in 1994, when Finance Minister Janice MacKinnon also announced that the universities would likely face no further reductions in funding for the 1995-96 year (Saskatchewan Finance 1994a). The focus on the link between education and employment – for young people and Aboriginal peoples this time – continued to be a vital part of government's priorities (Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment 1994a). In the build up to a new legislative session in early 1995 and an anticipated fall election, government re-announced status quo funding for the universities, with the promise of a two per cent increase for 1996-97 (Saskatchewan Finance 1995, 11). Universities, faced with increasing costs, again increased tuition fees for the 1995-96 year – the fourth time in four years. With students unhappy about the increase in tuition fees for an additional year and with the impending decrease in federal support for post-secondary education, students hoped that post-secondary education would be part of the electoral agenda in the 1995 provincial election (Nielsen 1995a).

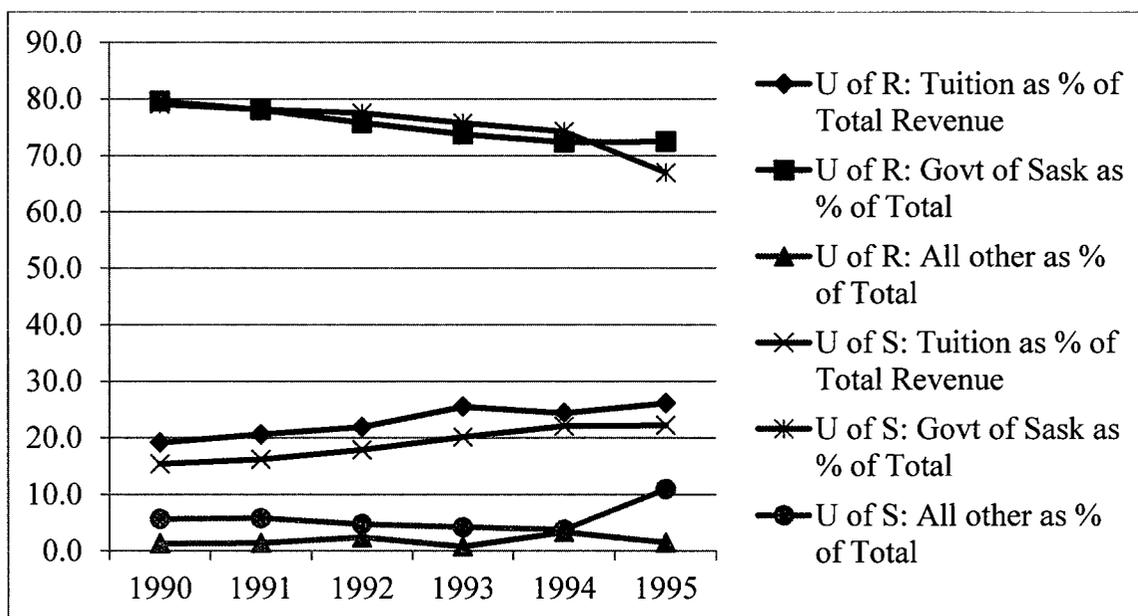


Figure 4.1: Tuition Fees, Operating Grants, and Other Funds as a Proportion of Operating Revenues at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina 1990-91 to 1995-96, from University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina Annual Reports, 1990-91 to 1995-96.

Student Loan Programming

Changes made to the Saskatchewan Student Loan Program in the early years after the election of the NDP government were largely incremental, and reflected the need to focus on the financial health of the province. One distraction from this path came with the federal Conservative government's introduction of Bill C-76 that would create substantial changes to the federal loan program. Two changes were particularly contentious: the elimination of the six-month interest-free grace period that allowed students some time to find employment before their student loans began to accrue interest and the creation of a 3% loan surcharge.

Students attempted to influence the newly-elected federal Liberal government in order to prevent the implementation of these changes to the loan program passed under

the previous Conservative government (Kyle 1994b), and were encouraged in their protests by the federal decision to end the 3 per cent loan surcharge as of August 1, 1993, as noted in a personal email from Erin Brady of the Student Financial Assistance Branch of the Government of Saskatchewan. While the six-month interest-free grace period was eliminated by the federal government (keeping only the six month period, during which the loans accrued interest), the provincial government decided to break from its federal counterparts and maintained the six-month interest-free grace period for Saskatchewan Student Loans.

Much of the discussion in the rest of 1993 and into 1994 focused on the Human Resources Development Canada discussion paper, *Improving Social Security in Canada* and its possible direct payments to students through vouchers (Burton 1994; Human Resources and Development Canada 1994b); an increase in loan limits related to the projected tuition fee increases; and the introduction of income-contingent loan repayment into the loan system (Human Resources Development Canada 1994a; Schmidt 1994). However, the response to the paper was so negative that none of the student loan-related changes were implemented – instead, government moved forward in other ways to reform student financial assistance.

Significant changes were made in federal and provincial programming mid-decade. The new Canada Student Financial Assistance Act (1994) impacted existing eligibility criteria and banking-related information. Most importantly, as of August 1, 1994, the province and the federal government changed the way that they shared funding for students, so that the federal government provided 60 per cent and the province provided 40 per cent of a student's assessed need – increasing the amount paid

out by the province (Saskatchewan Training, Education, and Employment: Student Aid Fund 1995). More money had to be routed by the province into the program in order to meet its commitments.

Policy Community

The post-secondary education policy community in Saskatchewan saw periods of unity but primarily periods of disagreement throughout this time period. There were periods of agreement between the two students' unions, between the provincial government and the students' unions, and between the students' unions and university senior administration; but there were also many instances of disagreement.

Throughout the early to mid 1990s, students' unions protested against tuition fee increases. However, by the mid 1990s, the protests were no longer directed against the universities and the provincial governments: instead, they were directed toward the federal government. The provincial government supported students' organizations to mobilize against the Human Resources Development Canada discussion paper (Axworthy Paper) by providing \$20,000 to research and present submissions to the parliamentary committee on social security reform (Burton 1994a).²⁷ Engineering students at the University of Saskatchewan – not traditionally mobilized students – “planted” a huge red “E” accompanied by a sign “Education is a top Priority” on the top of Saskatoon City Hall in order to raise awareness of the cuts to post-secondary education under the federal government (Booth 1993).

²⁷ The USSU had worked with the U of S Graduate Students' Association and two campuses of SIAST to form the *Action for Students* group, which presented to the Senate Subcommittee.

The increasingly fraught relations between the provincial and federal governments were also clearly reflected in the public debate (The Leader-Post 1994b; Nielsen 1994e). Throughout this period of organized advocacy, it was possible to see the students' unions, university administrations, and the provincial government agree on where the financial problems were coming from, and what needed to be done.

However, the provincial government was not able to deflect concerns about university funding and tuition fees for very long. Government established the Postsecondary Advisory Council, a group representing all public institutions in the province that would take a systematic approach to post-secondary planning (Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment 1994a, iii).²⁸ Although this group excluded student representatives, some have argued that this consultative approach was one of the things that made the NDP government successful at not alienating members of the policy community as much as it might have otherwise done during the state retrenchment of the early to mid 1990s.

Also contributing to the shift in focus from government alone to government and the universities was the extension of the Freedom of Information Act and Protection of Privacy Act to the universities and other post-secondary institutions in the province (Doskoch 1994). The information accessible under the act would include employee salary and travel cost details, details of personal services contracts, agendas and minutes of local authority meetings such as board of governors meetings (unless

²⁸ The need to work with the universities and other post-secondary institutions "to develop common objectives for a more integrated, coordinated education and training system that serves the economic and social needs of Saskatchewan people" was referred to in the February 1994 Speech From the Throne (Government of Saskatchewan 1994, 7).

private meetings are authorized by law), and results of statistical or polling surveys (Doskoch 1994; The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act).

The students' unions reverted back to their traditional antagonism toward each other. In Fall 1994, the USSU – which had left the Canadian Federation of Students in 1992 after accusing it of not representing student needs (Nielsen 1994b) – worked with several other student associations across the country to create a new national body. As of the end of November 1994, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) had been created, comprising students' unions at 16 universities (Nielsen 1994d). The different perspectives of the two university students' unions continued to influence the tactics they used to lobby government, and often making it possible to “divide and conquer” student advocates.

Caught between the universities, the students, and the financial realities facing the province, the government had to make very difficult choices. The reality was that the government would continue to face challenges from the media, the public, the students, and the universities about the necessary funding to support post-secondary education in the province. In addition, distrustful relations between the provincial government, universities, and students were an important part of the media agenda.

Public Opinion

Under the newly-installed New Democratic government, the approach to public opinion research commissioned by government changed – due in part to the need to be perceived differently than the Progressive Conservative government. It also reflected the reality that the new government would be proclaiming the new Freedom of

Information Act into law, even though it had passed under the previous government.

According to a memo released soon after the NDP government took over:

The former Conservative government paid about \$6M to pollsters and consultants during its second term in office, according to the NDP government. Most of the money went to two Toronto companies – Decima Research and Corporate Strategy Group – to conduct polls and interpret their results for the Devine government and the heads of major Crown corporations, according to a briefing memo prepared for the NDP cabinet. Regina polling firm Tanka Research, owned by Conservative insider Ken Waschuk, also received more than \$1 million in government work since the 1986 election (Wyatt 1991, A4).

NDP House Leader Dwain Lingenfelter argued that “all governments conduct polling, but [that] the legislature should be informed when they do” (as quoted in Wyatt 1991, A4).²⁹ Beginning in 1992, public opinion research that was quantitative in nature and paid for out of public funds would be released to the public on a quarterly basis.

Throughout the NDP’s first term in office (1991 to 1995), Saskatchewan people were polled regularly on their policy and spending priorities. Education was rarely a top priority, although it was always an important one. In early 1992, most respondents said that maintaining the education system (62%) and spending health and education dollars more efficiently (60%) were extremely important for them in the upcoming budget (Viewpoints Research 1992).³⁰ More specifically, people pointed to a need for increased spending on job training (56%), universities and technical schools (45%), and elementary and high school education (37%). Education remained a low priority for the

²⁹ “NDP house leader Dwain Lingenfelter said the most “despicable” thing about the vast sums of money spent on pollsters and consultants is that the government funneled much of it through Crown Corporations so it wouldn’t have to be disclosed publicly.” “[Grant Devine] defended the use of pollsters and consultants, which he said were used to monitor public opinion on important economic decisions like privatizations of Crown corporations.”

³⁰ The Saskatchewan government is currently preparing its 1992 budget, in which it will outline its economic plans for the coming year. Using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means somewhat important and 5 means extremely important, please tell me how important it is that the budget includes each of the following measures. ROTATE. Q10. Maintaining the education system? Q14. Measures to spend health and education dollars more efficiently? From Viewpoints Research 1992.

public throughout the rest of 1992, well behind the economy, debt reduction, and help for farmers (CanWest Opinion 1992; 1993).

However, into 1993, public opinion seemed to support government's focus on training and employment, as job creation was identified by 35 per cent of respondents as the most important priority for Saskatchewan government, followed by debt and deficit reduction (18%) and medicare (10%) (CanWest Opinion, Regina 1993).

Government polling done throughout 1993 and 1994 dealt mainly with accessibility in terms of training and job opportunities, as well as questions arising from the 1992 Program Review (the Johnson Report) around the structure and integration of the post-secondary system in Saskatchewan. In terms of priorities, Saskatchewan people were clear in the fall of 1993 about the government's focus on skills and training, with the vast majority wanting to see additional government money spent on apprenticeship programs (89%), technical training (84%), and retraining/updating courses (82%) – programming with direct connections to the labour market – followed by funds spent on professional programs in universities and colleges (55%) and undergraduate Arts and Science programs (43%) (CanWest Opinion, Regina 1994a).

July 1994 provincial government polling tested the public's impressions of how the provincial government should respond to the Axworthy Review. There was overwhelming support for one of the most hotly debated proposals – income contingent loan repayment – with 83% favouring student loan repayment based on income (CanWest Opinion, Regina 1994c). Regarding the responsibility for post-secondary education, a small proportion (25%) supported a reduction in federal funding for post-secondary education. Those opinions remained relatively consistent through Fall 1994,

when respondents pointed to a continued role for government in financing post-secondary education (62%) but also said that individuals and their families also must take responsibility (34%) (CanWest Opinion, Regina 1994b; 1994c).

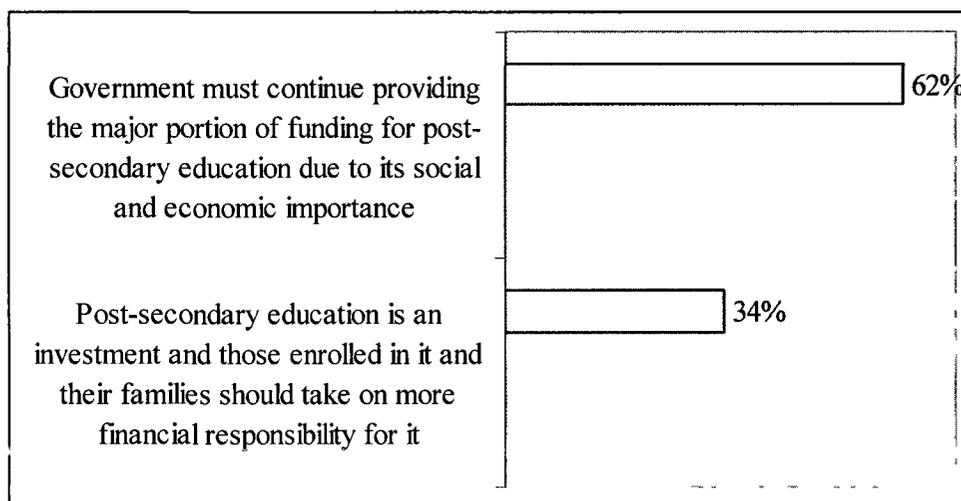


Figure 4.2 Saskatchewan Public Opinion on Responsibility for Financing Post-Secondary Education, from CanWest Opinion, Regina, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling and Market Research, July 1, 1994 to September 30, 1994*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit, 1994b).

Public concerns about the federal budget remained as well, with 61 per cent of respondents to a March 1995 poll indicating that they were concerned about the future of social programs, such as health and education, in Canada (CanWest Opinion Research Regina 1995a).

1995 Election: Policy Platforms and Public Opinion

As anticipated, Premier Roy Romanow called an election for June 21, 1995.

The three main political parties – the Progressive Conservatives, Saskatchewan Liberals, and the New Democratic Party – focused mainly on taxation, health care, size

of government, and gambling during the 1995 election. The NDP government's main election promise in June 1995 was that the government would continue along the same path of fiscal restraint evidenced in their first term in office (Canada News Facts 1995, 5078-9).

Post-secondary education was largely considered a non-issue throughout the election, except among students. Despite a regional and ideological division among the groups, they were among the more active interest groups during the 1995 election. The three political parties had very different approaches to post-secondary education funding, both in their platforms and evident throughout the campaign. When asked to explain the lack of focus on post-secondary education, NDP Minister of Education Pat Atkinson pointed to the government's high approval rating around post-secondary education; Conservative Bill Boyd said that people had other concerns; and Liberal Lynda Haverstock pointed to the media's lack of focus on educational concerns (McMurchy 1995a). As might be anticipated, these discussions were reported largely in the university press and not the mainstream media.

After a relatively low-key election, the NDP were re-elected with 42 out of 58 seats in the Legislative Assembly and 47 per cent of the popular vote (Elections Saskatchewan n.d.). The Liberals gained popularity, winning a total of 11 seats (with 35 per cent of the popular vote), and leaving the Progressive Conservatives with 5 representatives in the Legislature.

University Financing and Student Financial Assistance Under Premier Roy Romanow: July 1995 – 1999

The period between July 1995 and 1999 was characterized by continued financial retrenchment – both federally and provincially – which impacted the amount of funding available for universities in the province. Small or no increases in government granting meant that universities increased tuition fees throughout this time period, despite government’s attempt at persuading them to keep fee increases to a minimum. Government undertook a number of reviews, including a federal review of universities and student loans and a provincial one to address student funding. This was an important period in terms of the intersection between tuition fees, operating grants, and student loans: for the first time since 1991, the public and members of the policy community were drawing clear connections between these three areas of government spending. Not surprisingly, there were also continued tensions among the members of the policy community.

Government Spending and University Tuition Fees

Re-elected with a sizable majority, the NDP government promised to continue reforming training programs and overhauling education. The first few months of 1996 were active ones in the post-secondary education policy arena, with concerns about federal cuts to transfer payments (Hoffman 1996), commitment to reforming training programming and education more broadly (Government of Saskatchewan 1996b), and with the appointment of Harold MacKay as the [Saskatchewan] Minister’s Special Representative on University Revitalization. MacKay was to work with the universities

to identify key issues in post-secondary education and barriers to further cooperation in the sector (MacKay 1996).

As anticipated, while the 1996 budget contained the promised additional spending for education, it projected that funding would drop by \$17 million in 1998-99. While government promised to backfill 100 per cent of the federal cuts (related to the new CHST) to operating funding for both the universities and federated colleges for 1996-97, it was not able to maintain that backfill for 1997-98. Universities and colleges could expect a \$5 million cut (or 3 per cent) for 1997-98 and a further \$5 million (3 per cent) reduction in 1998-99 (Saskatchewan Finance 1996; Senate Subcommittee on Post-Secondary Education February 12, 1997, 7:14; Warden 1996k). The government's focus on jobs and economic growth led to a separation of the Department of Education, Training and Employment into two departments: Saskatchewan Education and Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (Saskatchewan Education and Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 1996).

University tuition fees increased at both institutions in Spring 1996. The University of Saskatchewan increased tuition for full-time undergraduate students by 4.7 per cent (Warden 1996g). The University of Regina technically avoided a tuition fee increase by introducing a course fee equivalent to a 5.1 per cent increase overall (Warden 1996j) while introducing higher fees for students in higher-cost programs (differential fees) (O'Connor 1996c; see also University of Regina Board of Governors 1996).

The release of the Report of the Minister's Special Representative on University Revitalization (the MacKay Report) in mid-September 1996 increased the focus both on university education and the funding of the universities. MacKay made a series of recommendations designed to facilitate communication and coordination within a changing university sector, and argued that student financial assistance in its current form needed to be revisited. Citing students' concerns about increasing tuition fees, he noted that the heavier reliance on tuition fees would mean that students would expect – and should receive – a larger role in university governance (MacKay 1996).

Concerns about the cost of post-secondary education – and the ability of the Saskatchewan student loan program to address the costs – led to the creation of the Student Financial Assistance Task Group, comprising student representatives, institutions, and government in November 1996. Mandated to "...recommend possible improvements to current student assistance programs, and to present innovative approaches to student assistance that the government will be able to advance in discussions with the federal government and the other provinces" (Student Assistance Task Group 1997, i), the Group undertook consultations and a survey of current students to help shape its recommendations which focused on adequate support for students, debt prevention, and debt repayment assistance (Warden 1996k). Concern around post-secondary education access and affordability at the federal government level was expressed through the creation of a Senate Subcommittee on Post-Secondary Education in Canada, which held hearings across Canada throughout Fall 1996 and Winter/Spring 1997.

Reinvestment in the social and the economic spheres were highlighted in government activities of spring 1997 (Government of Saskatchewan 1997b). Additional funds were provided to the universities to support the sharing of resources between the universities and the upgrading of science and research equipment (Canada News Facts 1997, 5465-6); Saskatchewan Education and Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 1998a, iii; Government of Saskatchewan 1997).³¹ Government addressed concerns about rising tuition fees by attempting to shift blame to the federal government while exerting moral suasion over the universities in the 1997-98 Budget Address to convince the universities not to increase tuition. Despite positive responses to the budget from university presidents, tuition fees did increase for 1997-98: at the University of Regina by 5 per cent and at the University of Saskatchewan by 6.5 per cent. Although there had been little government direction (at least in public) about universities' tuition fees until this point, in June 1997 the government argued that it was in the public interest to ensure that universities kept their tuition fees in line with those at universities in neighbouring provinces, but that it could also be in the public interest for universities to charge higher fees for high-cost professional programs.

In April, government announced a study into the per-student operating funding for the two universities (Warden 1997e). Recommended by the MacKay Report and reinforced through the Macleans reporting, the DesRosiers Consulting Group of Toronto would eventually be hired to assess the adequacy of funding for the

³¹ U of R President Donald Wells was quoted as saying that the MacKay Report provided a "carrot-and-stick approach to repositioning", with the universities deciding to heed the implicitly-stated warnings by participating in the processes coming out of the Report (UW Gazette January 22, 1997 accessed at <http://communications.uwaterloo.ca/Gazette/1997/January22/Changes%20urged%20in%20Saskatchewan>

universities (including the federated colleges), determine whether the division of funds between the two institutions is equitable, and recommend future funding mechanisms (DesRosiers and Associates 1997a). The consultants would meet with members of the university community multiple times over the next two years of work, and deliver seven interim reports as well as a final report.

In June 1997, the Government of Saskatchewan released a formal response to the Report of the Minister's Special Representative on University Revitalization (the MacKay Report), emphasizing their focus on post-secondary education (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 1996a) while noting that education costs should be shared in a "reasonable way" between the provincial and federal governments and students (Student Assistance Task Group 1997).

The face of Saskatchewan's political scene changed dramatically on August 8, 1997, with the creation of the Saskatchewan Party by four elected Liberals and four of the five sitting Conservatives. After petitioning the Speaker of the House, the newly-formed Saskatchewan Party (or Conservative-Liberal coalition, as it was first known) was given Official Opposition status as it now had the second largest number of elected officials (Spence 2007) – changing the landscape for the government which was half-way through its second term.³²

An eventful year in post-secondary education became even more so when the first of a series of reports by DesRosiers was released in early November 1997,³³

³² Bill Boyd, leader of the Conservative Party, resigned from the Conservatives and joined the group soon after the new party gained status, leaving the Conservatives without any elected members in the House. Leader Elwin Hermanson was elected that fall after a mail-in poll by party members. Due in part to the legal scandals befalling the party's former Members of the Legislative Assembly under Grant Devine, the Conservative Party voted to put itself into hiatus on November 9, 1997 for a period of ten years

³³ By this time, three interim reports had actually been completed and provided to government (DesRosiers and Associates 1997a, 1997b, and 1997c).

concluding that the two universities had adequate funding, despite the testimony provided by students, faculty, and administration of the two universities (Warden 1997g). In addition to the backlash around the first DesRosiers Report, the provincial government was faced with students demanding the release of the Student Assistance Task Group Report (Warden 1997d), which was supposed to be released in December but was eventually released in January 1998 – nine months after the Task Group’s work had been completed.

On the federal scene, December 1997 saw the release of the *Senate Report on Post-Secondary Education in Canada*. While the Senate Subcommittee noted that government officials did not suggest an immediate crisis, students, financial aid officers, and one bank did say that there was a crisis among a growing minority of students (Senate of Canada 1997a). Emphasizing the connection between tuition fees, operating grants, and student loans, the Subcommittee noted that concerns about the rate of tuition fee increases – particularly for university students – were reflected in the “fear that post-secondary education will become too expensive for the children of average Canadian families and will once again be limited to the brilliant, the rich, and those willing to run up huge debts to pay for it” (Senate of Canada 1997a, 18). The Subcommittee also commented on tuition and living costs and proposed changes to the federal and provincial student loan programs. However, the Subcommittee concluded that tuition in itself was not a barrier to access: rather, those students who incurred both tuition fees and living costs because they could not live at home were considered to be at greatest risk (Senate of Canada 1997a).

The connection between tuition fees and student debt continued to gather media coverage throughout 1998. In the build up to the 1998-99 provincial budget, much discussion focused around the capital needs of the universities. The University of Saskatchewan in particular had faced a series of set-backs when several buildings were condemned, and needed extensive investment in order to bring them back to functional order. However, when discussions of larger tuition increases – to meet the capital needs of the university – were floated by the universities (Warden 1998b), Minister Joanne Crofford responded by saying “I don’t think we really should be looking to students to solve this problem...It’s up to the grown-ups to figure this one out” (as quoted in Lyons 1998, A8).³⁴ Despite anticipated cuts to operating grants, the budget contained additional capital and operating funding for the universities, which government hoped would help the institutions keep tuition fee increases to a minimum (Saskatchewan Finance 1998). Government continued its moral suasion, when post-budget, Post-Secondary Education Minister Joanne Crofford reinforced that “she expected the universities to use restraint when it came to setting student fees” (as quoted in O’Connor 1998c, A3).

However, despite the extra funding from the province and the universities’ positive response to the budget (Klein 1998d), the universities implemented new differential tuition fees so that tuition would vary according to program. In addition, both universities implemented differential fees for international students (University of Saskatchewan 1998; University of Regina Board of Governors 1998). The University of Regina raised tuition fees by 2 per cent overall (O’Connor 1998d; University of

³⁴ I would argue that this comment is particularly telling, reflecting the perception of university students as youth/children, as opposed to the university administration as adults.

Regina Board of Governors 1998), while the University of Saskatchewan increased tuition fees by 6.4 per cent (Klein 1998b; University of Saskatchewan 1998).³⁵

After the universities had made their tuition fee announcements, the Minister of Post-Secondary Education openly addressed the government's policy around tuition fees and the relationship between the government and the universities. Minister Crofford said that the government was not considering a move to fully deregulate tuition fees, as Ontario had recently done. In terms of setting informal limits on tuition fees, however, the Minister reported that "...I think as a general rule of thumb, we've said that tuition should be in line with the tuitions across Canada, and certainly we don't want to see Saskatchewan sticking out as being higher than other tuitions" (Debates and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan 1998: 1718). This was in line with what polling had suggested in January 1997.

The final DesRosiers and Associates report, released publicly in October 1998, reinforced the consultants' conclusions that the universities were adequately funded. Creating even more animosity amongst the universities, the consultants also recommended that government should annually establish expectations for tuition fee revenue for the post-secondary system – such as 25 per cent of operating revenues – and leave the universities free to set tuition fee levels as they saw fit (DesRosiers and Associates 1998, 17).

During the 1998-99 year, the province was able to reach an agreement with the CMSF that would allot approximately 32,000 bursaries/scholarships to full-time Saskatchewan post-secondary students representing approximately \$97 million. The

³⁵ While emphasizing the continuation of a bursary program to "help needy students struggling to pay the higher tuition fees" (in Klein 1998b-2, A6).

first disbursements would begin in January 2000 (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 1999). This allowed the freed-up \$8.9 million to be transferred directly to the universities' operating grants, in exchange for the universities limiting tuition fee increases to two per cent for 1999-2000 (Adam 1999). This approach was extremely contentious. In essence, the province chose to use the CMSF funding to replace funding that the province had previously made available for *all* post-secondary students while transferring the freed-up funding to the *universities* in order to keep tuition fees from rising too much.

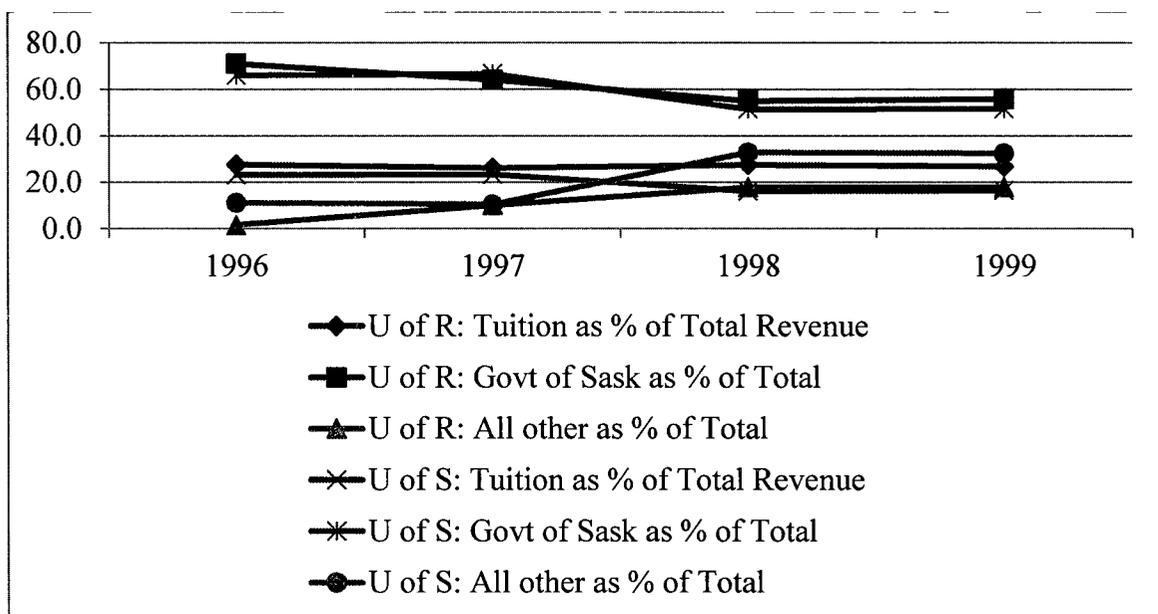


Figure 4.3: Tuition Fees, Operating Grants, and Other Funds as a Proportion of Operating Revenues at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina 1995-96 to 1999-2000, from University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina Annual Reports, 1996-97 to 1999-2000.

Access to post-secondary education remained a high profile issue for both provincial premiers and post-secondary ministers into 1999. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), chaired by Saskatchewan's Minister of Post-Secondary

Education and Skills Training Glenn Hagel, released its *Report on Public Expectations of Postsecondary Education in Canada* in February 1999 which emphasized the importance of post-secondary education for Canadian society and economy (CMEC 1999, 1).

Pre-budget discussions between government and the universities reflected the turmoil that sector faced in the 1999 planning period. There was a real sense – at both institutions – that they could not take any more cuts from the province without making decisions around program cuts. While students at the University of Regina lobbied for a tuition freeze, the University of Saskatchewan considered a proposal to charge cost-recover tuition fees (\$30,000 per year) for Dentistry students (University of Saskatchewan 1999b). Although an earlier version of the proposal had been rejected in 1996, its time had come in 1999.

Government continued to focus on investing in education and training to help create even more jobs – particularly for youth in skilled trades and health-related programming – in the 1999-2000 budget. March's budget saw operating grants for the universities increased by 7 per cent over two years.³⁶ The department began to implement the new funding framework for the universities, as recommended in the DesRosiers and Associates Final Report, which was likely to mean a loss for the U of R and a gain for the U of S because of the activity-based assumptions of the funding model (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2000a).

Student Loan Programming

³⁶ Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of Saskatchewanians polled in a post-budget survey approved (strongly or somewhat) of the government's investment to build and repair schools and university buildings (April 1999).

1995-96 was another important year for the student loan programming available for Saskatchewan people. August 1st is a watershed date in repayment management for both the CSLP and the SSLP. As of August 1st 1995, Canada Student Loans could only be negotiated with chartered banks and credit unions that were risk-sharing with the federal government.³⁷ Participating lenders were paid premiums for managing loans, rather than managing debt that was fully guaranteed by the government (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training: Student Aid Fund 1996). Budget 1996-97 reported that this change in structure and process would save the province approximately \$6 million per year (Saskatchewan Finance 1996). In both the federal and provincial cases, the province continued to manage the application, approval, and eligibility processes.

A major policy change in student financial assistance was negotiated in March 1996, with the provincial government signing an exclusive five-year contract with the Royal Bank of Canada to transfer negotiation, financing, and repayment of provincial student loans authorized after August 1, 1996 from the province to the bank – mirroring the federal move of the year before (Saskatchewan Education and Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training Annual Report 1996).

With regard to student financial assistance, the Subcommittee recommended that provinces move toward integrated loans with the federal government, that more research be undertaken into the connection between costs and access, that student borrowers be provided with better/more information on debt and repayment when

³⁷ The institutions entering into the risk-sharing agreement with the federal government were: Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Royal Bank of Canada, Bank of Nova Scotia, Credit Union Central of Canada (participating credit unions), Members of L'Alliance des caisses populaires de l'Ontario, Members of La Fédération des caisses populaires Acadiennes, Members of La Fédération des caisses populaires de l'Ontario, and Members of La Fédération des caisses populaires du Manitoba.

borrowing, and that a package of measures should be implemented to help borrowers manage debt (Senate of Canada 1997a). The federal government's 1997-98 budget introduced changes to the student loan program, that "were intended to offset the rapid rise in tuition fees and other costs associated with higher education" (Perreux 1997, A3). The expansion of interest relief and a renewed interest in income-contingent repayment raised flags for student groups. Concerns about access to post-secondary education in the province continued to be expressed by editorialists in *The StarPhoenix* and *The Leader-Post* as well during this period (StarPhoenix 1997; Leader-Post 1997). Students continued on with lobbying activities focused on the cost of education, and particularly on tuition fee increases.

Repayment processes for Saskatchewan student loan borrowers who had loans dating prior to 1996 changed in July 1997, with the province signing an additional risk-sharing agreement with the Royal Bank. In exchange for a 5 per cent risk premium, the Royal Bank agreed to accept provincial student loans in good standing that had been negotiated prior to March 1996 as well as any new loans. This move allowed the provincial government to reduce its investment in the Student Aid Fund from \$52 million to just over \$35 million (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training: Student Aid Fund 1998, iii).

Following the URSU rally, the long-awaited final report of the Minister's Task Group on Student Assistance and government's response to that report were released. The Student Assistance Task Group Report (1997) focused on enhancing access to student employment; increasing loan limits and debt management assistance; extending interest relief; making Saskatchewan loan funding portable throughout Canada; and

exploring alternative approaches to funding such as expanding tax credits, making loan interest tax deductible, and tying repayment more closely to income.

Noting that tuition fees had increased significantly, both in real and in absolute terms since the early 1980s, the Task Group pointed out that institutions had faced increasing enrolments while having their operating grants reduced. The impact of the costs being passed on to students was an important consideration of the group, in both their survey work and in their final report. The Task Group had also commissioned a survey of existing post-secondary students in the province, and noted that time constraints meant that they could not receive input from a true representation of Saskatchewan students.

Increasing student assistance remained an important part of policy-making in the province during 1998-99. An important change for Saskatchewan students in 1998-99 was the introduction of the Saskatchewan Student Bursaries, which replaced forgivable loans and loan remission.³⁸ This change allowed for higher borrowing levels with less debt (University Affairs 1998).

The focus on education was key in the 1998-1999 federal budget, which emphasized the link between employment and education by creating new tax credits, debt management tools, and supports for part-time students as well as the ten year, \$2.5 billion Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF) (Department of Finance Canada 1998). The federal government's "in" to the educational sphere remained – as it had since the early days of student loan programming – student financial assistance and its role in supporting education for “an increasingly competitive and interdependent world economy” (Department of Finance Canada 1998, 2).

³⁸ Loan remission would continue to be available for Special Incentive Students only.

The provincial government responded to the Task Group Report by noting that the three priorities identified by the Task Group – to ensure that students with dependent children (in particular) had access to adequate support, to work toward debt prevention, and to improve debt repayment assistance informed decision-making (of students) and the maintenance of a federal role in financing post-secondary education and training (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 1998a) – would be addressed in the 1997-98 budget. For 1999-2000, important changes were announced for the province’s student loan system as well. Additional non-repayable funds were created for students with children, and people repaying student loans would be able to deduct interest payments from their income taxes (Government of Saskatchewan 1999a, 9).

By May 1999, negotiations between the province and the universities around tuition fee increases resulted in the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation Bursaries replacing both the Saskatchewan Student Bursary and the Saskatchewan Study Grant, following similar rules for qualification (Government of Saskatchewan 1999d). In addition, some of the redirected money would be used to make Saskatchewan Student Loans portable, and available for Saskatchewan students studying outside the province.

Concerns about the increasing cost of education – and the inability of student loans to meet those costs – led to the introduction of a new policy in the province. If a student’s assessment indicated that “...their need for assistance is more than \$60 per week of study than they are allowed under the program [they] will be required to submit a financial plan” (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training:

Saskatchewan Student Aid Fund 2000, 10). Although the program's foundational principles included the fact that the loan program was meant to partially meet the student's needs, this new policy confirmed that student loans were being seen as the primary source of post-secondary funding for many students.

Discussion between the federal and provincial governments around the potential harmonization of the two loan programs continued on throughout 1999-2000. While the federal government remained relatively focused on work around the new CMSF and the creation of a National Student Loans Service Centre, harmonization remained on the agenda – at least for the province (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2000).

Policy Community

By Fall 1995, the USSU had responded to continued fiscal constraint on the university's campus by compiling a report "examining all options available to address expected cuts from the federal government" (Klein 1995, A1).

Following the recommendations of the MacKay Report, government created two inter-university committees in early 1997: the Universities Coordinating Committee and the Government-Universities Consultation Committee, which comprised the deputy premier, the minister and deputy minister of post-secondary education and skills training, the finance minister, and the presidents and chairs of the boards of governors of both universities (The StarPhoenix 1996, A3). Notably absent from these two groups were student representatives, who remained only part of the Scholarship, Loans and Bursary Committee.

National coverage of the Saskatchewan universities – through the Macleans' Universities Edition – galvanized universities, students, and the government into action after the Macleans Rankings reported that the University of Saskatchewan per-student funding was \$2,800 less than that at the University of Regina (Warden 2006). Student-led rallies focused on a tuition fee freeze. Tension between the federal and provincial governments on the issue of funding for universities was clear, as was the provincial government's attempt to highlight the federal government's removal of funds from that policy area. Premier Romanow argued that it was not the province that was pushing the increase in fees, but the federal government's withdrawal of funds from transfer payments (O'Connor and Braden 1996). In the lead up to the March provincial budget, students undertook phone-ins, meetings, and a postcard campaign aimed at both the federal and provincial governments to try to influence spending on education – and to stem further tuition fee increases – but with seemingly little effect (Warden 1996d).

In its focus on the federal government, the Saskatchewan Provincial Alliance for Education, formed in the mid-1990s to represent faculty, support workers, students, and teaching support from public institutions in the province (including the University of Regina Students' Union), testified to the Senate Subcommittee that Saskatchewan students were facing increasing debt loads, related to high unemployment rates among students and increasing tuition fees (Senate Subcommittee on Post-Secondary Education in Canada 1997b).

Students' unions at the two universities continued to disagree on the approach that government should take toward funding post-secondary education, as well as disagreeing on the value of their own tactics. While the URSU, a member of the

Canadian Federation of Students, called for publicly-funded “free education”, the USSU publicly distanced itself from the other students. The issue continued on in the public eye, when a majority of the 700 delegates at the 1997 NDP provincial convention voted in favour of freezing university and college tuition fees (Braden 1997b). However, NDP Minister Joanne Crofford argued that she would not take this action because it would breach university autonomy (in Braden 1997b). The division between the two students’ unions continued until the next provincial election: students at the University of Regina (CFS members) rallied in front of the Bank of Montreal in late January 1998, to focus on the role of the banks in student debt.³⁹ The USSU focused on lobbying the federal finance minister. These approaches continued on into 1999.

Public Opinion

Government commissioned extensive polling around post-secondary access, costs, and management throughout the 1995-1999 period, reflecting the importance that education had gained in the public, government (both federally and provincially), and media agenda. Concerns around funding for post-secondary education and increasing tuition fees were clearly expressed through the government’s Fall 1995 polling. When Saskatchewan people were asked what they believed to be the most important issue facing Saskatchewan’s education system, two of the top three responses were lack of funding (20 per cent) and high tuition fees (9 per cent) (CanWest Opinion 1996a, 23).⁴⁰

³⁹ During this time, there was talk about a potential merger of the Royal Bank – which held Saskatchewan Student Loans at the time – and the Bank of Montreal, thus the BMO provided a useful focal point for the demonstration.

⁴⁰ The other of the top three was the response “Don’t know” – 19%.

Further polling done in December 1995 found that while 40% of respondents said that the amount government spent on education was about right, 50 per cent of respondents reported that government should be spending more on education (CanWest Opinion 1996a). Access to programming was part of February's polling, with respondents saying that young people had better access to SIAST programs (88%) than university arts and science programs (76%) or university professional programs (60%) (CanWest Opinion 1996b).

Post-secondary education issues remained on the public agenda throughout the fall, with the public expressing concerns about funding for post-secondary education. Evident concerns about tuition fees and the funding of post-secondary education were demonstrated in government polling between September 1995 and April 1997. The most important issue facing Saskatchewan's education system was identified by most as funding related: either lack of funding, cutbacks, or costs of education (CanWest Opinion 1996a; 1996b; Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997a; 1997b; 1997c).

Government's interest in the public's perceptions of the costs of education – and of borrowing to support that education – continued on in early 1997. January 1997 polling asked respondents whether an average debt of \$13,300 for Saskatchewan post-secondary students is too high, about right, or low. Over one-third (38 per cent) indicated that it was too high, while 43 per cent reported that it was about right. A nearly even proportion of respondents reported that it was low (9 per cent) or that they did not know (10 per cent) (Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997b). Framing debt as an amount – rather than tying it to a credential or an outcome – was clearly problematic.

Government also tested perceptions of provincial tuition fees, both as a proportion of total operating costs and in comparison with neighbouring provinces, as shown in Figure 4.3. While a greater proportion of the public felt that tuition fees were too high when told that they amounted to “about 25% to 30% of the total cost of university programs”, that proportion decreased when told that “Saskatchewan university students currently pay tuition fees between the amounts paid in Manitoba and Alberta (Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997b). This was an important test of the framing of university tuition fees, and is clearly reflected in the way that government dealt with tuition fee announcements after this polling was undertaken – pointing to its importance in crafting messaging.

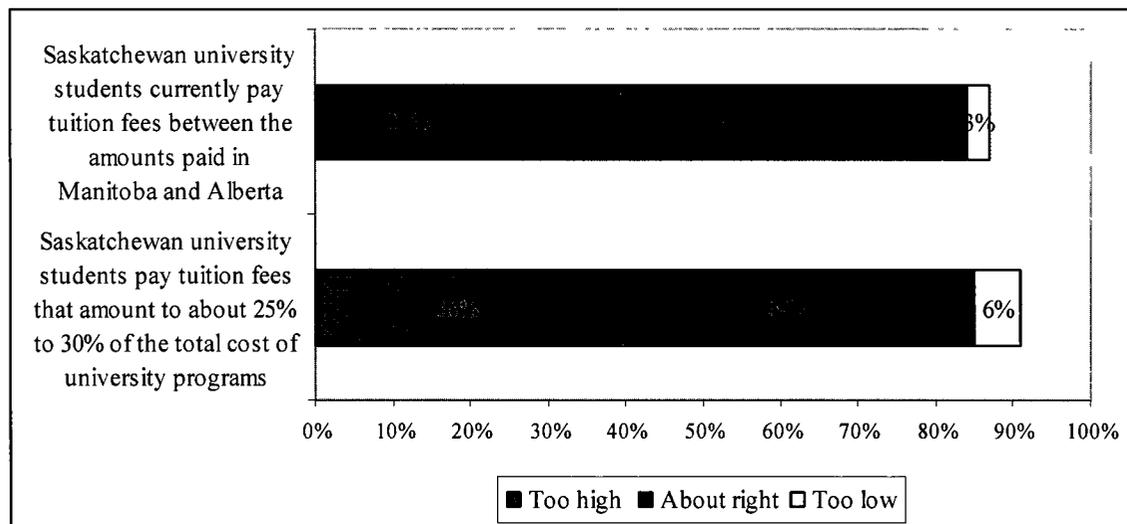


Figure 4.4: Saskatchewan Government Message Testing around University Tuition Fees, January 1997, from Anderson/Fast Market Research, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling and Market Research, January 1, 1997 to March 31, 1997*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit, 1997b).

By September 1997, concern about student debt – and the relationship between tuition fees and debt levels – was again in the news while the universities began their budget planning processes. Government released a wide-ranging survey on student assistance conducted in April 1997 among current post-secondary students for the Student Assistance Task Force that showed University of Saskatchewan students had the highest debt levels among 400 post-secondary students in the province (Belhumeur 1997, A4; Trimension Research 1997).

When asked which financial factors were of concern on a scale of 1 (not at all concerned) to 5 (very concerned), current students surveyed were most concerned about the cost of tuition and books (4.1, n=399), the cost of living (3.5, n=400), access to financing (3.5, n=400), future debt loads (3.5, n=400), and not [having] enough money to go to school (3.3, n=393) (Student Assistance Task Group 1997, 8).⁴¹ Students were asked about their preferred options for student assistance as part of the Task Group survey. While respondents were generally in favour of most options, they were most positive when it came to increasing employment opportunities and extending the interest-free period after graduation, as can be seen in Figure 4.4 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

⁴¹ Using a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is not at all concerned and 5 is very concerned, the question asked was “To what extent are the following items a concern for you regarding financing your post-secondary education or training?”

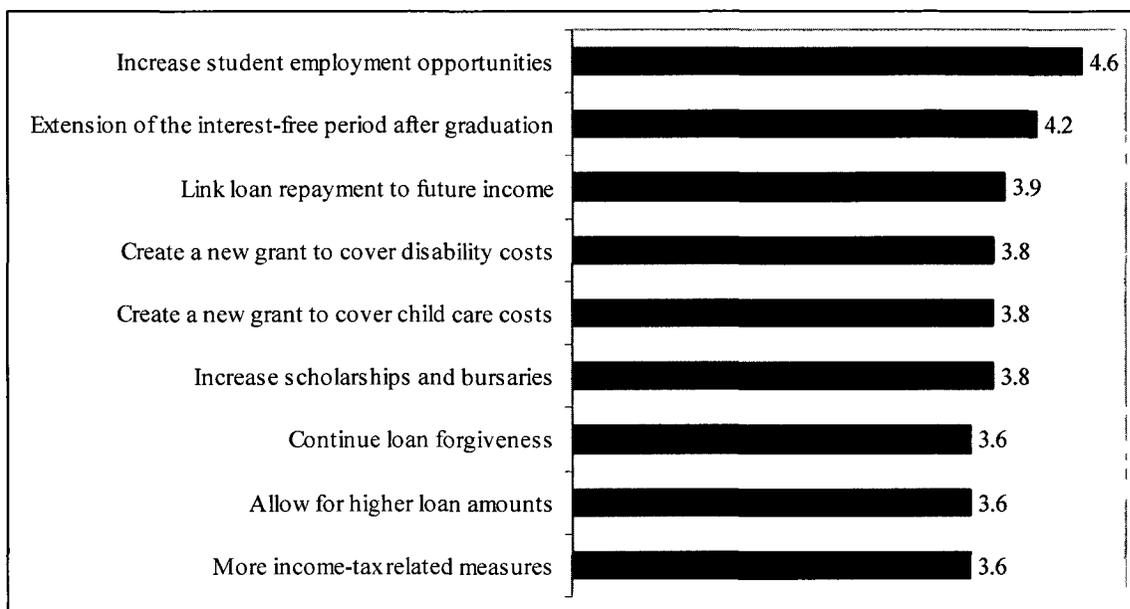


Figure 4.5 Support for Student Financial Assistance Policy Options, from Trimension Research 1997.

Using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), when asked whether an average debt of \$14,500 for university graduates was manageable, U of S students reported an average of 2.8 (n=100) and U of R students reported an average of 2.9 (n=100).⁴²

Despite the eventful year, education remained on the agenda of a relatively small segment of the Saskatchewan public. In November 1997, three-quarters of respondents polled agreed that “the provincial government should be increasing government spending in any area”. Of those, only 12 per cent identified education as an area for spending (Anderson/Fast & Associates 1998a).⁴³ In January 1998

⁴² In his testimony on behalf of government to the Senate Subcommittee on Post-Secondary Education (February 12, 1997 7:13), Deputy Minister Dan Perrins noted that an average of \$13,000 was a “substantial” amount of debt for students to graduate with.

⁴³ This question was asked by Anderson/Fast & Associates (1998b) again in January 1998, and just under half (47 per cent) of respondents indicated that government should cut spending in the areas of government expenses (26 per cent), welfare (8 per cent), grants/loans (5 per cent), crown corporations (4 per cent), aboriginal issues (3 per cent), gambling (3 per cent), and other (3 per cent).

government polling, respondents favoured spending on health care (43 per cent, up from 25 per cent) and education (38 per cent, up from 15 per cent) (Anderson/Fast & Associates 1998b).⁴⁴ Thus, there seemed to be additional support for even more spending on social supports – including education – as well as a continued focus by some on the economy.

Despite concerns about the cost of education and about government's management of post-secondary education and media coverage of tuition fees and student debt (Clark 1998), overall public priorities remained consistently focused on tax reduction, reducing the provincial debt, and increased social spending. However, government continued to face concerns from the public around the cost of post-secondary education. Polling conducted in October 1998 found that almost half (49 per cent) of respondents identified high tuition costs as the most important issue facing Saskatchewan's education system today – an increase from the 20-30 per cent of respondents who had identified costs as issues over the previous three years (Anderson/Fast & Associates 1999a), as shown in Table 4.1.

⁴⁴ A further 5 per cent indicated other areas of spending, and 22 per cent said that they didn't know where spending should increase (Anderson/Fast & Associates 1998b).

Table 4.1 Most important issue facing Saskatchewan's education* system today

Sept. 1995	Sept. 1996	October 1996	April 1997	January 1998	October 1998
Lack of funding 20%	Funding/cutbacks 18%	Cost of education 24%	DK 26%	Training system (in its entirety) 29%	High tuition costs 49%
Don't know 19.1%	Cost of education 12%	Funding/cutbacks 18%	Cost of tuition 17%	Funding/costs too high 19%	Poor employment rate 9%
High tuitions 8.7%	Quality of education 9%	Lack of jobs 10%	Funding/cutbacks 11%	On the job training 8%	Poor quality education 7%

* As of April 1997, "education" becomes "training". As of October 1998, "education" becomes "post-secondary training system"

Sources: CanWest Opinion and Anderson/Fast & Associates, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling and Market Research*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit, Selected years).

In addition to expressing concerns about tuition fees and other costs of training, respondents to the past two years of polls had continually identified the cost of tuition as an impediment to training (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 The cost of tuition makes it hard to get training

	October 1996	April 1997	January 1998	October 1998
Agree*	83%	81%	85%	80%
Disagree*	**	12%	**	16%
Don't know	**	**	**	4%

* Categories are collapsed: Agree includes strongly and somewhat agree, while Disagree includes strongly and somewhat disagree.

** Unreported values.

Sources: Anderson/Fast & Associates, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling and Market Research*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit 1997a; 1997c; 1998b; 1999a).

A greater proportion of Saskatchewan people approved of the government's management of education between throughout September 1995 to May 1998 period than of government's management of post-secondary education during the same period. Between February 1996 and May 1998, the proportion of respondents approving of government's management of post-secondary education varied between 35 per cent in February 1996, dropping to under 35 per cent in late 1997 and early 1998, before increasing to 47 per cent in May 1998 (CanWest Opinion 1996a 1996b; Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997a; 1997b; Anderson/Fast & Associates 1997c; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c), as shown in Figure 4.6.

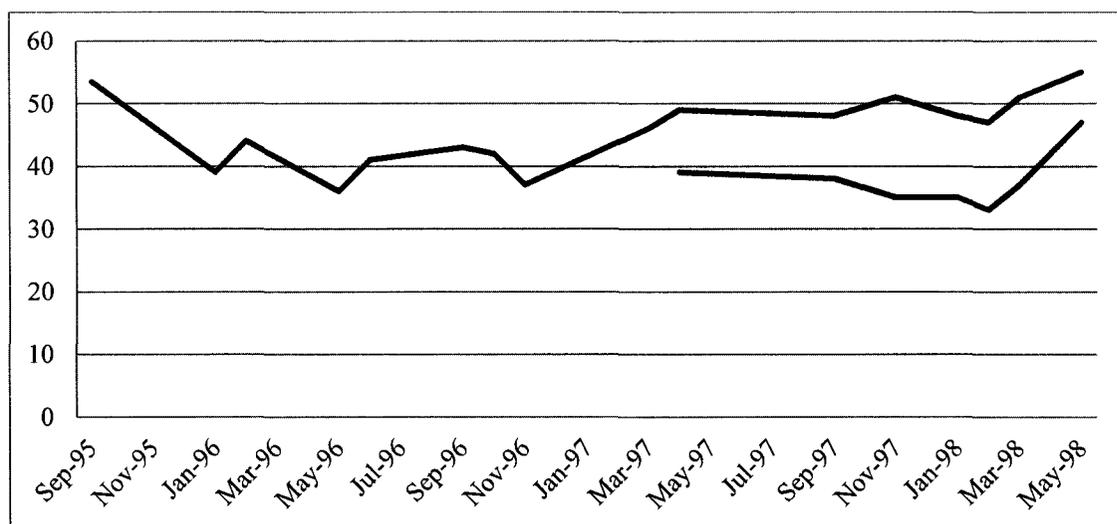


Figure 4.6: Approval of Government's Management of Education and of Post-Secondary Education, September 1995 to May 1998, from CanWest Opinion 1996a 1996b; Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997a; 1997b; Anderson/Fast & Associates 1997c; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c).

As a reflection of the poor assessment of government's performance in managing post-secondary education, in September 1997 the public was asked the

question “What would you like to see changed about the way Saskatchewan’s government manages education in universities and technical schools?” as part of the government’s omnibus polling. In response, the majority provided financially-oriented answers, with 42 per cent saying lower tuition fees, 14 per cent responding reduce cutbacks/increase transfer payments, and 11 per cent suggesting increasing aid to students. A further 6 per cent responded that matching education with job market needs should be changed, and 5 per cent specified increasing accessibility as a priority (Anderson/Fast & Associates 1998a).⁴⁵

While the connection between tuition fees and student debt continued to gather media coverage throughout 1998 and 1999, overall public priorities remained on tax reduction, the provincial debt, and health-related spending (Anderson/Fast & Associates 2000a, 60-62). Despite government concern about tuition fees in the post-secondary sector, the Saskatchewan public seemed to view the education system as acceptable. The majority of Saskatchewan respondents between September 1995 and January 1999 continued to respond that Saskatchewan’s education system was better or the same than the rest of the country (CanWest Opinion 1996a; 1996b; Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997a; 1997b; Anderson/Fast & Associates 1997c; 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999a; 1999b).

Tuition fees were firmly planted on the government’s radar screen. Government polling conducted in April 1999 found that one-quarter (26 per cent) of respondents identified “lowering tuition fees” as the most important action to be taken by

⁴⁵ In an odd mix of responses to a question asking people “What are they [government] doing with universities and technical school that you support?”, 11 per cent said good instructors, 9 per cent said the institutions were well-respected, 5 per cent said expanded programs, 5 per cent indicated the student loan program. A total of 18 per cent mentioned both increases in tuition fees and keeping tuition fees reasonable...obviously contradictory responses (Anderson/Fast & Associates 1998a).

government to “improve education in our universities and colleges” (Anderson/Fast and Associates 1999b, 10).

In August 1999, Premier Romanow called a provincial election for September 16, 1999 – seemingly in a reasonably strong position vis-à-vis the Saskatchewan Party. However, the election campaign was to see a number of surprises, including around accessibility and tuition fees in post-secondary education.

Election 1999

Post-secondary education funding – particularly student support and tuition fees – became part of the discussion in the 1999 election. Main priorities for all three parties included job creation, taxation, education, health care, rural issues, government spending, and crime levels. Perhaps responding to the most recent provincial polling done on tuition fees and access to post-secondary education, the New Democratic Party’s platform included a promise of free tuition for first-year university and college students, while also floating the idea of expanding the tuition credit past the first year – looking at post-secondary education as a public right (Saskatchewan New Democratic Party 1999; Burton 1999a).

The Saskatchewan Party included post-secondary education as a pillar of its 1999 election platform *The Way Up!*, through its *Education for a New Millennium*, which proposed greater cooperation between the two universities, working toward greater labour market responsiveness in the post-secondary sector, and reviewing the student loan program to ensure access to funding for all qualified students (The Saskatchewan Party 1998). Focused on the student loan programming available to

Saskatchewan students, the Saskatchewan party platform did not offer anything to students in terms of tuition fees. This may have been in part because the party's platform was approved the year before the election at their annual convention, and the party had not predicted the rise in public concern about tuition fees that would be reflected in the other two parties' platforms.

The Liberal Party included many of the same priorities as the NDP and the Saskatchewan Party had, while emphasizing post-secondary education as one of their main issues. Their approach to student support was announced in April 1999, prior to the election campaign. They addressed the tuition fee issue in a similar way to the NDP, promising \$1,000 in tuition credits, but for *both* first and second year students enrolled full-time in a Saskatchewan post-secondary institution. They also proposed to "review the funding formula for post-secondary institutions to ensure tuition never exceeds more than 25 per cent of the cost of a student's education" (Wiberg 1999, A11).

Working together for the first time in years, the University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan Students' Unions created the *Vote Education Campaign* during the 1999 election, intended to "focus on making the presentation of our universities a priority during the provincial election" (University of Regina Students' Union and University of Saskatchewan Students' Union 1999). The campaign targeted public opinion, and included letter-writing, public discussions, lawn signs, t-shirts, and billboards in major centres. (O'Connor and Adam 1999).

However, despite the parties' focus on post-secondary education within party platforms and by the students' unions, post-secondary education was just not a priority for

most Saskatchewan people. A poll focused on the tuition fee promises and conducted by UCAL Management Consultants for the StarPhoenix, the National Post, and 650 News Talk Radio during the election⁴⁶ asked 1,003 Saskatchewan people

whether the NDP's free first-year tuition promise was a good policy, a bad policy, or an unimportant one to you, 36.9 per cent described it as a good policy, compared with 31.8 per cent who said it was a bad one. Another 19.4 per cent described the policy as unimportant, while 11.9 per cent did not know or did not respond (Mandryk 1999a, A1-2).

Over four in ten (41.9 per cent) of decided voters felt the policy was bad, compared with 36.1 per cent of decided voters who supported it. As some argued, the negativity from the public reflected the criticisms leveled by students and post-secondary administrations – that it was unfair for non-first year students, that the money should be used to fund institutions directly, and that it would just lead to an increase in tuition fees (Mandryk 1999a; see for example Courtney 1999; Ross 1999).

The election yielded a very close result. Out of 58 Legislative seats, the NDP won 29, the Saskatchewan Party held 26, and the Liberals held the balance of power with 4 seats, although one would be contested (Elections Saskatchewan n.d.). This was only the second minority government that Saskatchewan had experienced.

University Financing and Student Financial Assistance Under Premiers Roy Romanow and Lorne Calvert October 1999 – 2003

Spending on post-secondary education and access to university education in particular was an important part of the 1999 election. It remained in the public consciousness – and on the government agenda – for the majority of the 1999 to 2003 period. The provincial government undertook substantive changes to the provincial

⁴⁶ The poll was conducted on September 9 and 10, 1999. N=1,003. The poll was considered accurate within plus or minus 3.1 percent, 19 times out of 20.

loan program throughout this period as well, moving toward a harmonized program with the federal government which would have implications for students. Perhaps most contentiously in this area, the provincial government negotiated the implementation of the Canada Millennium Scholarships as a replacement for existing provincial bursaries so that the freed-up funds could be used to hold university tuition increases to a minimum.

Government Spending and Tuition Fees

After being returned to office in a minority position, the NDP government – led by Premier Roy Romanow – formed a formal coalition with the Liberals, led by Jim Melenchuk, which would last two years. The agreement meant that two of the four elected Liberals would sit in the House of Commons as Cabinet Ministers: Melenchuk would become the Minister of Education and Jack Hillson would become Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, while a third would become the Speaker of the House (Ron Osika). The fourth would sit briefly in the House before Elections Saskatchewan overturned his election and ran a by-election, which he would not win. As part of their “common view” on policy, the two parties had agreed “that better education and better access to higher education are critically important for our children’s future, and for our province’s future” (Government of Saskatchewan 1999a, 1).⁴⁷

Discussions within the universities around tuition fees – particularly at the University of Saskatchewan – were acrimonious by Fall 1999. Council’s budget committee faced a proposal to have tuition established based on the market value of the

⁴⁷ One year later, the media assessed whether or not the Liberals’ policy proposals had been integrated into government activities within the first year of government, as promised through the coalition agreement. The evaluation showed that no proposals had become government policy.

resulting education while emphasizing that students were eligible to receive tax deductions based on tuition which helped reduce the cost that individuals would pay (Klein 1999h, A3). However, angry students had supporters among the media. A StarPhoenix editorial of October 23, 1999 argued that “skyrocketing tuitions are paying for a quality of education hurtling toward mediocrity” (The StarPhoenix 1999c, A14).

In a context of strong concerns about post-secondary educational costs, the new coalition-led government announced that its tuition promises made during the election would be scrapped and that Minister of Education Jim Melenchuk and Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training Glenn Hagel would lead public consultations into post-secondary education (The Leader-Post 1999a, A10). After speaking with people in fifteen communities in January 2000, the Ministers concluded that it was necessary to support the post-secondary institutions adequately, to address the need to provide education within rural communities and the cost of living for students living away from home, to expand technology-enhanced learning, to focus on disadvantaged students, and to ensure that student assistance was targeted and could be used for people staying in the province – all measures to be part of the upcoming budget (Debates and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan 2000, 830-831; Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2000a).⁴⁸

Demonstrations by the University of Regina Students’ Union were accompanied by concerns about greater debt loads being carried by students expressed by the University of Regina’s Associate Vice-President of Student Affairs (O’Connor 2000b, A3). For the first time in a number of years, the administration and students were

⁴⁸ It was not clear to members of the public that there would be no formal report written on these consultations, as many continued to wait for a formal report to be released (see Ramsay 2000, A9).

providing the same message. Additional funding was provided for post-secondary institutions in March 2000 budget, and was designed to help the universities keep tuition fee increases under 2 per cent (Saskatchewan Finance 2000; Debates and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan 2000, 1070).

However, the implementation of the new DesRosiers funding formula meant that these extra revenues would differ for the two universities, and the universities would not actually learn what proportion they would receive until later that year – meaning that tuition increases were actually just delayed⁴⁹. Responding to the public’s desire to stem population decline (and migration of youth), government introduced the Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education Graduate Tax Credit for any graduate choosing to stay in the province (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2000, 7).

With the new funding formula implemented in June 2000, U of R received a much smaller than anticipated increase in operating funds, leading to an increase in tuition fees of 8 per cent (Kyle 2000, A3; O’Connor 2000a; University of Regina Board of Governors 2000).⁵⁰ Unlike previous years, both the university and the students’ union placed blame on the provincial government’s implementation of the DesRosiers report. While the University of Saskatchewan had been abiding by the “national norm” (or national average) policy when setting their tuition fees – ensuring that their fees approximated the average tuition fees across the country – fee increases ranged from 6 per cent to 14 per cent (University of Saskatchewan 2000).

⁴⁹ They would learn in June that the U of S would receive 4.33% and the U of R would receive 2.5%.

⁵⁰ Regina Mayor Doug Archer publicly demanded that the government provide more funding for the University of Regina, which seemed to be a first for a municipal politician speaking openly in favour of more funding for universities. Traditionally, the municipal politicians were involved in discussions around transit, housing, and other living-related issues – not the academic costs of post-secondary education.

The March 2001 Speech from the Throne began by welcoming the new Premier of the province, Lorne Calvert, who had been elected leader of the party in an intense contest involving four sitting cabinet ministers in early February. Government promised to focus on education and training as key for the success of young people in the knowledge-based economy, including summer employment for students, a new program of Centennial Scholarships designed to provide merit-based undergraduate aid, and a doubling of the education tax credit (Government of Saskatchewan 2001; McQuarrie 2001; Saskatchewan Finance 2001). Investments in online learning, training, and in the student aid program added up to the largest investment in post-secondary education and skills training in the history of the province (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2001).

However, the operational funding for universities contained in the 2001-02 budget was not enough to cover the rate of inflation, let alone to assuage concerns about rising tuition fees (Burton 2001). Students continued to emphasize the connection between student debt and increasing tuition fees (Cowan 2001). It was also increasingly clear from the Department's 2001-02 Annual Report that university tuition fees were becoming a public issue that government needed to address: this was the first annual report to include comparative information about tuition fees, with the universities of Manitoba, Alberta, and Calgary being used against the Saskatchewan average for first year Arts and Science Tuition (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2002a).

Despite the concerns about tuition fees, the University of Saskatchewan proposed an increase of 15 per cent in average tuition fees for the 2001-02 year – noting

that they were likely to increase by a similar percentage for the next academic year as part of a two-year plan to adjust fees to reflect the average fees charged by comparable universities (Klein 2001a; Klein 2001b; University of Saskatchewan 2001).⁵¹

Following the lead of the U of S, the University of Regina proposed a 9 per cent increase in tuition fees for the 2001-02 academic year.

The debate around tuition fees and student debt (accessibility) versus educational quality continued on into Fall 2001, when the annual Statistics Canada tuition fee assessment was released and Saskatchewan's tuition fee increases were the highest in the country for the second year in a row (Adam 2001a, A5). References to the financial pressures facing the two provincial universities – and to the relationship between government funding, tuition fees, and other sources of funding – were prominent in the November 2001 *A Progress Report on University Revitalization* (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2001a). Intended as a way to revisit the MacKay Report recommendations of 1996-97, the report highlighted the successes of the universities while pointing to the challenges facing them (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2001a, 1).

Amid increasing calls from students for a tuition fee freeze, and knowing that Saskatchewan people favoured additional investment in education (Saskatchewan Finance 2002), Post-Secondary Education Minister Pat Lorje publicly stated that the government was not in a financial position to provide for a freeze (Cowan 2002). Driven by concerns about increasing costs, students at the University of Saskatchewan

⁵¹ Pharmacy students saw an increase of 28 per cent while Nutrition students faced an increase of 40 per cent in their tuition for the next academic year.

started a group called *Citizens for Accessible Education* – separate from the Student’s Union – and organized a student strike (Klein 2002a).

While government had to tap into Crown profits and the fiscal stabilization fund (often referred to as the “slush fund” or the “rainy day fund”) in order to balance the budget for 2001-02 (Parker 2002), investment in post-secondary education was focused on research, development, and training for skilled labour (Saskatchewan Finance 2002; Silverthorn 2002). As of April 2002, the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training merged with the Department of Education, becoming the Department of Learning which would “serve the needs of all Saskatchewan learners” (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2002, 3). The new focus of “cradle to grave” education was the importance of developing a competitive economy and society for the people of Saskatchewan.

Tuition fees at the universities were projected to increase for the 2002-03 academic year. The University of Saskatchewan had announced a two-year staged increase the previous year, so students were anticipating an additional 15 per cent increase. However, post-provincial budget, the U of S Vice-President Finance Tony Whitworth stated that the full increase would not be necessary and that fees would be adjusted on a program by program basis – from 4 to 6 per cent (Klein 2002b; Foster 2002). The University of Regina would also be increasing fees: a total of 8.8 per cent across the board. Newspaper editorials were critical of these tuition increases, and placed the blame on government. When questioned about tuition fee increases, Learning Minister Jim Melenchuk pointed to the strength of the student aid system and the low living costs in Regina and Saskatoon, compared with the rest of the country

(Foster 2002a, B2). U of S president Peter MacKinnon responded by emphasizing that the role of the university was being challenged by the increasing personal costs of education and the decreasing governmental support.

Government's priorities continued to include a focus on education and training in order to continue the province's development in 2003-04 (Government of Saskatchewan 2003, 12; Saskatchewan Finance 2003, 4). This focus included research, development, capital spending, and scholarships, bursaries and expanded loans – including a focus on educating and retaining youth. Despite the focus on education, universities did not receive enough funding to prevent tuition fee increases. The University of Saskatchewan announced an average tuition fee increase of 4.8 per cent, with 10 per cent of the revenues raised from the increase being allocated to student aid (Boklaschuk 2003, A9; University of Saskatchewan 2003). The University of Regina imposed an even higher tuition fee increase, at 8.5 per cent across the board (Leader-Post 2003, B7; University of Regina Board of Governors 2003).

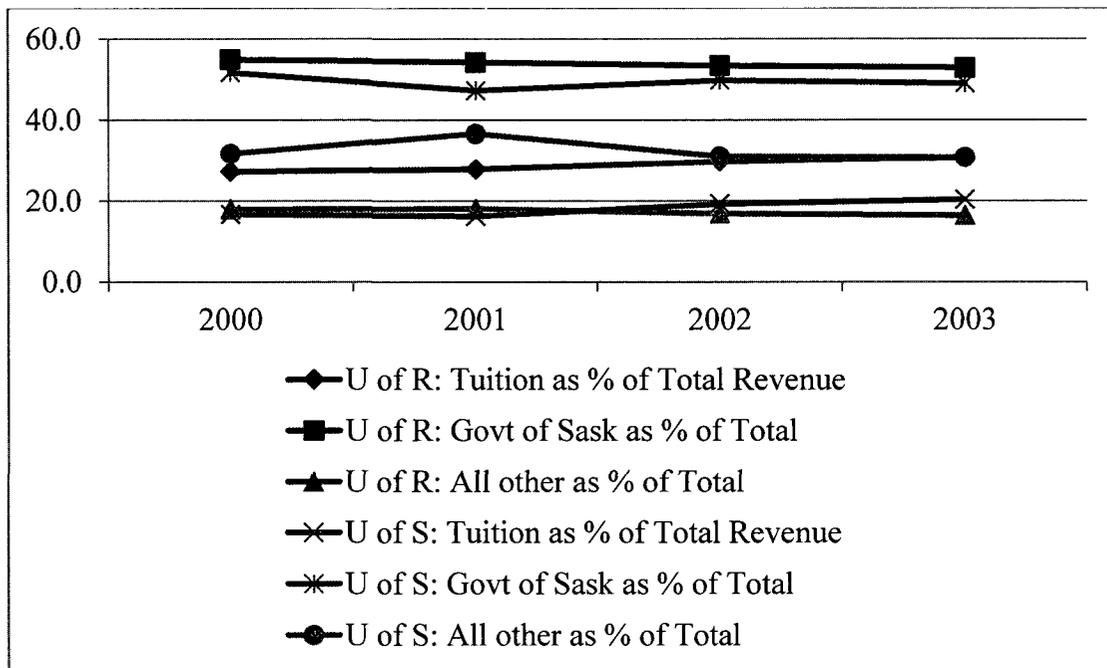


Figure 4.7: Tuition Fees, Operating Grants, and Other Funds as a Proportion of Operating Revenues at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina 2000-01 to 2004-05, from University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina Annual Reports, 2000-01 to 2004-05.

Student Loan Programming

For the province, the 2000-01 student loan year was focused on one key policy issue: working with the federal government in order to integrate federal and provincial loan program delivery to be completed by January 2001. The Royal Bank had indicated that it would not be seeking to renew the agreement (Scott 2001), in part because of reportedly high loan default rates – due primarily to defaults of loans from the private vocational schools.⁵²

In order to bring provincial loans in line with the federal loans (in preparation for integration, the 2000-2001 budget also eliminated the six month “grace” period on

⁵² Historically, default rates among university students/graduates has been very low. In Saskatchewan, the default rates among those in private vocational schools were very high, with rates among borrowers attending regional colleges and SIAST were relatively low.

Saskatchewan Student Loans, which meant that as of August 2000, students would begin to accrue interest immediately after completing their programs. They would still not have to make payments for six months, but those six months would not be interest-free. Interestingly, this change was not announced on budget day, but raised during debate on the budget (The Leader-Post 2000b).

At the federal level, March 2000 also saw an announcement from the federal government that the federal Human Resources Department would be taking over the student loans program, after the banks declined to renew their management contract (Kyle 2000).⁵³ Student response was positive at first, but changed given that the federal government had contracted with another private company to create the National Student Loan Service Centre in order to manage loan disbursement and repayment. It was possible that this new Centre could also take on the Saskatchewan loans – if they were to be integrated with the federal loans. This would leave only the pre-1995 loans still held by the Student Aid Fund to be dealt with (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training: Saskatchewan Student Aid Fund 2001).

Student loan policy for 2001-02 focused on developing joint program policies for the Canada-Saskatchewan Integrated Student Loan Program which was implemented in time for June 2001 (Block 2001), while pursuing an agenda of “simplification” designed to make the application, maintenance, and repayment processes easier to manage for students (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training: Saskatchewan Student Aid Fund 2002, 2). The new joint program also included improved eligibility criteria for Interest Relief (based on the federal criteria), a

⁵³ It was rumoured at the time that the banks that had expressed a willingness to continue on with the arrangements wanted an additional \$100 million to help manage the “high risk” associated with student loans.

new Debt Reduction in Repayment (DRR) benefit, and joint repayment processes.

Saskatchewan also announced that it had created a “Refund Set-Off Program” with the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) in order to recover delinquent loans through the withholding of tax refunds (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training: Saskatchewan Student Aid Fund 2002).

Much of the work around student loan policy in 2002-03 focused on ensuring that the Canada-Saskatchewan Integrated Student Loan Program implementation went smoothly. A series of working groups were created to support the development of compatible program policies (a particular challenge for the province) while also ensuring that Saskatchewan students had access to the best possible loan program (Saskatchewan Learning 2003).

Policy Community

Members of the post-secondary education policy community had often faced challenges in terms of their relationships with each other, and with their relevant national-level organizations. The University of Regina Students’ Union faced internal pressures during the months of March and April. The president-elect planned to create a “new student activist body” for the province, while leading URSU to de-federate from the Canadian Federation of Students (Wasyliv 2002). However, this move failed, and the University of Regina Students’ Union remained a part of the national student organization.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ A motion to hold a referendum to de-federate had been defeated at a February Special General Meeting. However, at the time of the vote, a deal had been made between URSU and the Regina Engineering Students’ Society that gave RESS veto power over CFS campaigns in exchange for their support in defeating the motion (Sorochynski 2002). The RESS had frequently expressed concern about

Dissatisfied with the efforts of individual students' unions/associations and divisions within the post-secondary sector, Saskatchewan post-secondary students from six institutions – including the two universities – created the *Saskatchewan Students Coalition (SSC)*. Officially announced on March 17th, the Coalition would target lobbying efforts at elected officials – and presumably in the up-coming election – rather than to protest against government actions (Bonneville 2003). Interestingly, for one of the only times during the 1991 to 2004 period, summer 2003 saw the University of Regina and the University of Regina Students' Union working together toward accessing greater funding for the university from the federal government – following their attempts to work in coalition through the *Saskatchewan Students Coalition*.

Public Opinion

Access to affordable post-secondary education remained a high priority in government polling between 1999 and 2003. Nearly all (89%) of Saskatchewan respondents in October 1999 said that it was very (58%) or somewhat (31%) important for it to be easier for families to afford higher education for their children at a regional college, SIAST, or university (Anderson/Fast & Associates 2000a). This set of responses seemed to support the promises made by the coalition partners during the election, yet those promises had been – and continued to be – heavily criticized. However, respondents were also asked what they thought “would be the best way to help families afford tuition for higher education”, and the responses were telling. Only 4 per cent supported making the first year of university and tuition free while 12 per

CFS campaigns, and were able to mobilize a large number of members to appear – and vote – at URSU meetings. However, once the vote was taken, the national office of CFS announced that they would not honour the agreement.

cent supported providing all university or college students with a \$1,000 bursary to help cover tuition costs – meaning that a total of 16 per cent supported either the NDP or Liberal approaches. A large majority of 69 per cent, however, favoured making it easier to get student loans and forgiving a portion of the loan if students would stay in Saskatchewan after graduating (Anderson/Fast & Associates 2000a).

Despite this apparent focus on student loans versus tuition fees, concern about tuition fees remained in the public's consciousness. Government polling asked Saskatchewan residents about the barriers that may prevent them or their families from taking post-secondary education in February 2000, and over one-third (34 per cent) reported that tuition fees were their major obstacle (Anderson/Fast & Associates 2000b, 23).

Sensitivity to public opinion was also an important part of the government's agenda. In its 1999-2000 Annual Report, Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training noted that it had “regularized polling to establish baselines and data, permitting the longitudinal measurement of public opinion and research” (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training 2000, 31). In addition, the department had developed a sector-wide public satisfaction survey. The department was one of the pilot departments chosen to develop and implement performance measurement processes, to which public opinion polling contributed.

Discussion around access to post-secondary education continued in earnest into 2001 – both at the provincial and at the federal levels. The impact of the public on government spending decisions, despite the need for spending on higher education for both economic and social reasons was highlighted by then Intergovernmental Affairs

Minister Stephane Dion, who was quoted as saying “Popular pressure is on health because people die in hospitals and they do not die in universities – except at times from boredom” (in Ford 2001, A6). Provincially, the focus was on the link between tuition fees, government grants, and student debt.

Pre-budget questions around education were part of the Fall 2001 polling cycle for the government. When told that “This year, the provincial government will spend 20 per cent of its annual budget (1.1 billion) on all levels of education and training”, 4 per cent of respondents thought the amount was too high, 56 per cent felt it was about right, and 32 per cent said it was too low (Doug Fast & Associates 2001c). In a context of economic downturn, the majority of respondents (65 per cent) emphasized education as part of government’s core activities, responding that government should focus on “making sure core public services (health, education, etc) and infrastructure (roads, water, and sewer) are maintained while holding the line on taxes and other services” (Doug Fast & Associates 2001c).

Throughout the budget-development process in Fall 2003, government continued to poll Saskatchewan people about their priorities for government spending. Education was identified as a first priority for 13 per cent of respondents, and as a second priority for 21 per cent. Although education more broadly was not identified by a majority of people, issues around access to post-secondary education – including concerns about tuition fees – remained prominent. They were clearly on the government’s agenda, as well as being on the public’s agenda as demonstrated through government-commissioned public opinion polling. Both the variety and quantity of

questions asked increased during this time period, although not all questions were repeated throughout.

From November 1999 to June 2003, participants in the government’s omnibus surveys were regularly asked “what barriers do you or your family members experience which prevent you from taking post-secondary education and training?” At some points in the polling process, respondents were allowed to provide multiple responses, while at other points they provided the most important response.

Table 4.3: Do you or your family members experience any barriers, which prevent you from taking post-secondary education or training?

Response	November 2001	June 2002	June 2003
Yes	31%	28%	30%
No	65%	72%	70%
Don’t Know/Unsure	4%		

Sources: Doug Fast & Associates, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling and Market Research, October 1, 2001 to December 30, 2001*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit, 2001c). Fast Consulting, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling, June 2002*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit. Fast Consulting, 2002d). Fast Consulting, *Government of Saskatchewan Public Opinion Polling, June 2003*. (Regina, SK: Saskatchewan Executive Council Communications Coordination Unit, 2003d).

Beginning with November 2001, respondents were first asked whether they faced any barriers, at which point they were asked the second question about what those barriers were. Thus, the respondent group after 2001 would be those facing barriers, while the respondent group prior to 2001 would be all respondents (see Table 4.3). The barriers identified by respondents could be classified as both financial and non-financial in nature, although all had a financial component to them. The primary

barriers identified included living costs, tuition fees, fear of debt, geography, and the uncertainty of the labour market (Doug Fast & Associates 2001c; Fast Consulting 2002d; 2003d).

Throughout this time period, tuition fees remained a significant barrier for many – becoming more so in November 2001 when this particular question was asked only of those identifying that they faced barriers to post-secondary study (see Figure 4.8). Between 66 per cent of respondents identified tuition as a barrier in November 2001, 63 per cent in June 2002, and 60 per cent in June 2003 (Doug Fast & Associates 2001c; Fast Consulting 2002d; 2003d). References to concerns about living costs and the fear of going into debt were also reported by a majority of respondents.

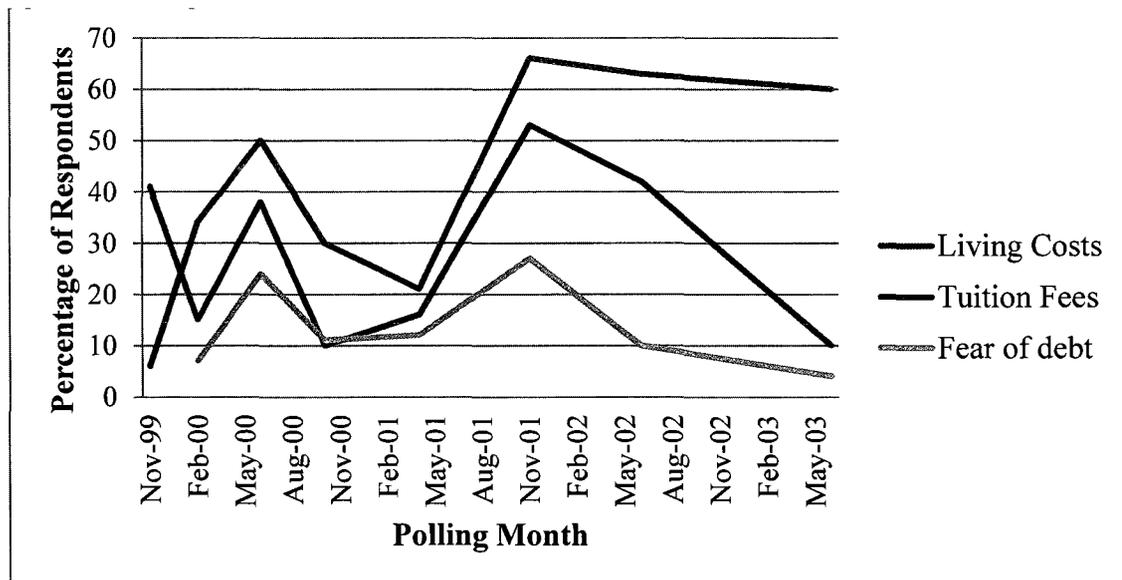


Figure 4.8: Barriers to You or Your Family Members' Post-Secondary Education and Training: November 1999 to June 2003, with data from Anderson/Fast & Associates (2000a; 2000b; 2000d); Doug Fast & Associates (2001b; 2001c); Fast Consulting (2002e; 2002g).

As well as assessing the public's perception of their own barriers to post-secondary access, government wanted to assess the public's perception of the way government was managing post-secondary education. Between November 1999 and May 2003, the public was asked a number of questions around education management. The first question was "Compared to the rest of the country, do you think Saskatchewan's education system is better, the same, or worse?" Respondents were most likely to report that the system was about the same, throughout the 1999 to 2003 period (see Figure 4.9).

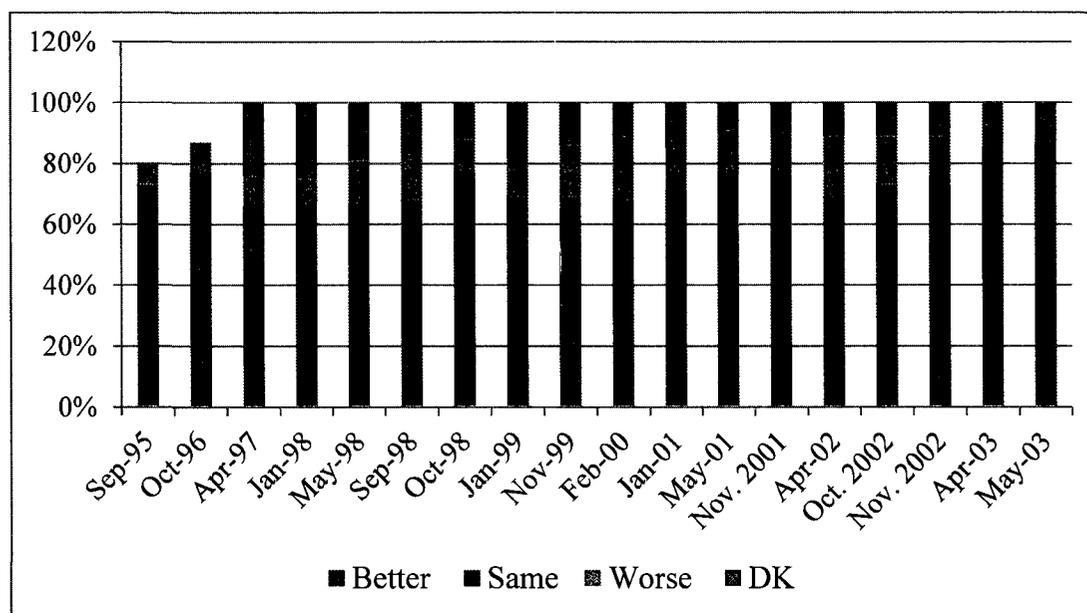


Figure 4.9 Saskatchewan's Education System Compared to the Rest of the Country November 1999 to May 2003, with data from CanWest Opinion (1996a); Anderson/Fast Market Research (1997a; 1997c; 1998b; 1998c; 1998d; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c); Doug Fast & Associates (2001c); Fast Consulting (2002b; 2002f; 2002g; 2003b; 2003c).

During the 1999 to 2003 period, respondents were also asked to assess whether or not Saskatchewan's post-secondary education system was better, the same, or worse

than the rest of the country. Again, the greatest proportion of respondents said that the system was about the same – not raising any great concerns for government (Anderson/Fast Market Research 1997a; 1997c; 1998c; 1998d; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; Doug Fast & Associates 2001c).

Government had been asking respondents whether or not they approved or disapproved of the way Saskatchewan's provincial government was managing education since 1996.⁵⁵ However, this question was more frequently asked as part of the omnibus polling throughout the early 2000s. It seemed that at this point, government's management of education was of great importance, since it was asked so many times in a short period of time and it fed in to performance indicators and midterm performance assessment post-coalition government.

Premier Lorne Calvert called an election for November 5, 2003. In the previous three elections there had been strong representation from three parties. However as Saunders (2003) argued, this election would focus on the role of government in the economy, and would be between the long-entrenched NDP and the "upstart" Saskatchewan Party.

⁵⁵ Starting in May 1996... Generally speaking, do you strongly approve, moderately approve, moderately disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the way Saskatchewan's provincial government is...managing education. March 1997 managing education in elementary/high school (AND education in university). Beginning in April 2001, the question was altered to "How much do you approve of the way the provincial government is handling the following....education?"

Election 2003

As with the 1999 election, post-secondary education was included in the platforms of the participating parties – particularly as linked to standard of living, quality of life, and the future for Saskatchewan people. The New Democratic Party (NDP) focused on “building the future for young people”, which included educational and funding initiatives like expansion of interest-free status for students working in the province (one-year grace period), expansion of grant programs which would increase the number of qualified applicants and reduce the debts of more than 10,000 students (Klein 2003a), a \$1,000 tax credit for graduates employed in the province after graduation, and increasing funds for SIAST and regional colleges to support training initiatives (NDP 2003; Makarenko 2003; University of Saskatchewan On Campus News 2003). Additionally, the NDP emphasized the need to reduce the cost of post-secondary education through increasing bursaries and reducing debt, in order to help increase the quality of life for families in the province (Makarenko 2003).

The Saskatchewan Party also included post-secondary education spending in their 2003 platform *Let's Get Saskatchewan Growing*. Linked to growth in the province and in the tax base, the Saskatchewan Party focused on tax deductions for four years after completing post-secondary education, funding for institutions, and the remodeling of the student loan program (University of Saskatchewan On Campus News 2003; Saskatchewan Party 2003).

The importance of post-secondary education for the economy was also emphasized by the Liberal Party, which ran on “strengthening the economy by creating careers, not jobs” (Makarenko 2003, 7). This included maintaining access to post-

secondary education and providing incentives for graduates to stay in the province once their programs were complete. Commitments involved the forgiveness of undergraduate student loans through a four-year tax credit tied to residency in the province, as well as a commitment to keep university tuition fees at no more than 30 per cent of the institutional operating budget, lobbying the federal government to support First Nations education, and support for graduate and professional studies (University of Saskatchewan On Campus News 2003).

Interestingly, the three platform items around post-secondary education were very detailed – often focusing on tax credits and rebates, pre-tax and after-tax, and with different emphases on incomes and benefits – and thus challenging to fully and publicly compare. A StarPhoenix editorial of October 14, 2003 stated that “the only post-secondary grads Saskatchewan retains as a result of the promises by political leaders toward that end are likely to be mathematicians, accountants, and tax lawyers competent to assess the merits of their competing offers” (The StarPhoenix 2003, A10; see also Munroe 2003). Despite the confusing detail, students did hear the parties make post-secondary related promises throughout the campaign, not just in the early phases as in the 1999 election (Klein 2003b). Representing students at public post-secondary institutions in the province, the Saskatchewan Student Coalition launched a print, billboard, and bus-shelter campaign focused on implementing a cap on tuition fees or a limit on per-year increases and on graduate retention (Pulga 2003).

The November 5, 2003 Saskatchewan election saw a tight – and negatively-oriented – competition, with the NDP being returned to government with only a slight

majority of 30 seats in a 58-seat legislature.⁵⁶ The Liberals were shut out (including those that had crossed the floor to become NDP members during the coalition period), and the Saskatchewan Party held the remaining 28 seats in the House.

***University Financing and Student Financial Assistance Under NDP Premier
Lorne Calvert 2003-2004***

Government Spending and University Tuition Fees

Post-secondary education remained on the public and government agendas (both federal and provincial) throughout Fall 2003 and into Winter 2004. The NDP government continued to focus on education and opportunity – particularly for youth (Government of Saskatchewan Throne Speech 2004, 2). Funds targeted at entrepreneurship for youth, additional student summer employment, Aboriginal-focused training and employment, and capital spending were highlighted in the 2004-05 budget. In addition, funds for research and development, for nursing education and medical training, and for post-secondary graduates through the Post-Secondary Graduate Tax Credit were increased (Saskatchewan Finance 2004).

Despite university presidents' and students' unions concerns about a 2 per cent increase in operating grants, Minister of Learning Andrew Thompson countered this by arguing that:

Two per cent is a reasonable approach. We feel it provides them with significantly more money, balanced out with other competing interests...Education is one of the provincial government's priorities, second only to health...government must offset what it gives to universities with what Saskatchewan taxpayers will accept (as quoted in Rhodes 2004, B1).

⁵⁶ Much of the campaign was impacted by the "Cartoon Controversy", which saw one of the Premier's staff create a cartoon picturing the Saskatchewan Party leader as a Hitler-type figure.

Soon afterward, the University of Saskatchewan announced an average tuition fee increase of 4.8 per cent, with the majority of students facing a 2 per cent (or less) increase because of the university's national norm tuition fee policy (University of Saskatchewan 2004a). Other cost-cutting measures and a hiring freeze had previously been announced by the U of S. The University of Regina also increased fees by program. Overall, the university would have a 6.1 per cent increase in fees, but that increase would range from 4.8 per cent for students in Arts to 11 per cent for students in Administration (Pacholik 2004; University of Regina Board of Governors 2004).

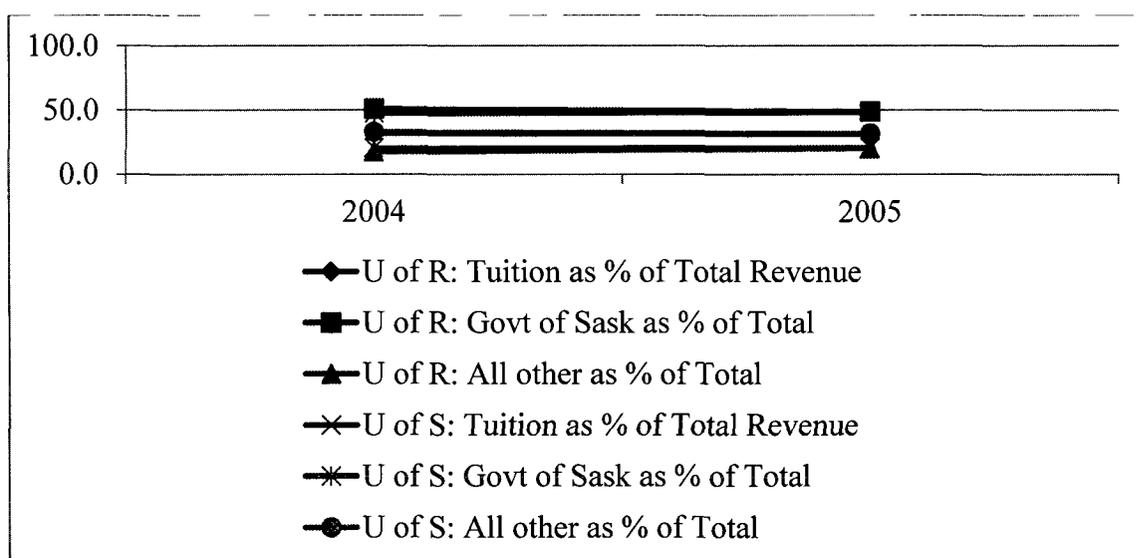


Figure 4.10: Tuition Fees, Operating Grants, and Other Funds as a Proportion of Operating Revenues at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Regina 2004-05 to 2005-06, from University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan Annual Reports 2004-05 and 2005-06.

Policy Community

Coalition-building among members of the policy community continued on throughout the fall of 2004. The URSU and USSU announced in November 2004 that they “would begin lobbying the provincial government for a tuition freeze” (Martin

2004, 3). However Learning Minister Andrew Thompson, while agreeing that tuition fees could not continue to rise, argued against a tuition freeze stating that “The \$15 million it would cost for a tuition freeze in the next two years would come at the cost of other programs” (as quoted in Martin 2004, 3). The universities were also vocal about their concerns regarding a potential tuition fee freeze, reminding the public – and the students’ unions and government – about their autonomy and ability to govern themselves without interference from government.

Student Loan Programming

The 2004-05 loan year was a relatively uneventful one for the Canada-Saskatchewan Student Loan Program. The federal government talked about increasing student loan limits and decreasing parental contributions, decisions both criticized and welcomed by student leaders. Further changes were made to the joint student loan program, by both the federal and provincial governments, to be implemented in the 2005-06 loan year. These changes, which fall outside of the temporal scope of this project, involved an overall increase in assistance levels, an expansion of bursary assistance, reducing parental contributions, and enhancing the interest relief program (Saskatchewan Learning: Saskatchewan Student Aid Fund 2005).

Conclusions

The 1991-2004 period was characterized by a number of important trends in post-secondary education financing policy, in relations among members of the policy community, and in public opinion.

University tuition fees increased dramatically in the 1991 to 2004 period.

During this time not only did students in undergraduate programs like Arts and Science face triple-digit increases in tuition fees, but the introduction of differential fees at both universities meant that students in “higher cost” programs would have seen double-digit tuition increases on a year-to-year basis. As of 2004, tuition fees accounted for between 20 and 32 per cent of the universities’ operating budgets, up from 16 to 18 per cent in 1991.⁵⁷

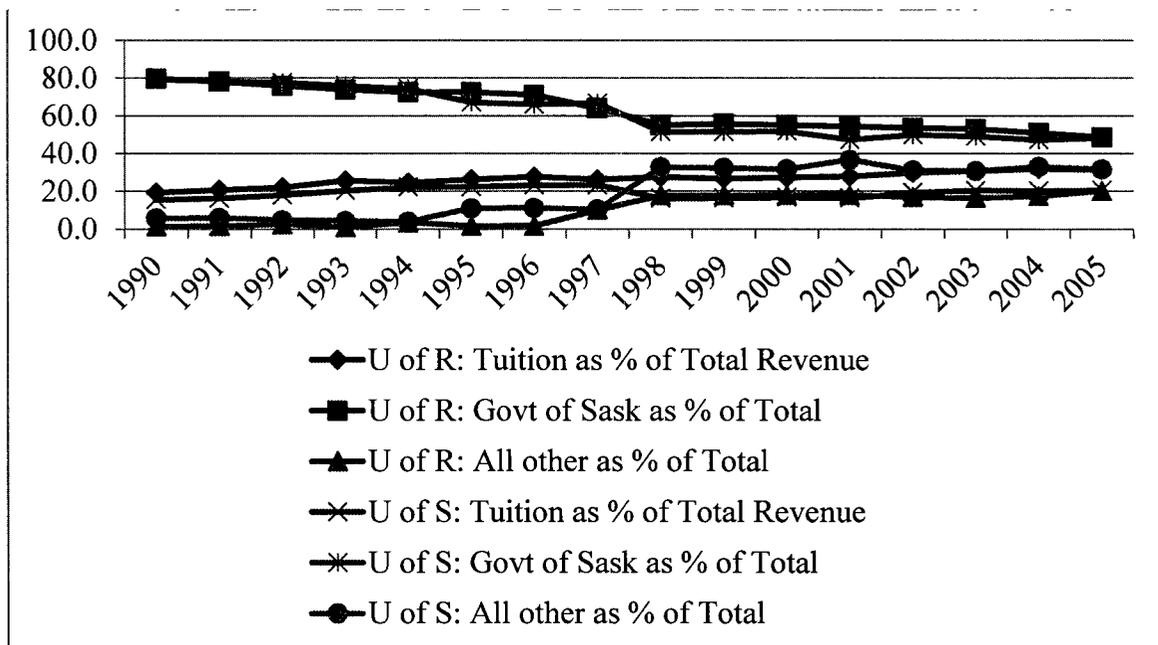


Figure 4.11: Tuition Fees, Operating Grants, and Other Funds as a Proportion of University Operating Revenues 1990-91 to 2005-06, from University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan Annual Reports, 1990-91 to 2005-06.

Another way to look at the increasing costs of university tuition fees in the

Saskatchewan context is to look at the percentage increase in the fees over the 1990-91

⁵⁷ The proportional increase in tuition fees at the University of Saskatchewan looks deceptively limited when compared with the University of Regina, because of the rapid growth in other funds the U of S included in its operating budget.

to 2004-05 period. During this time, average university tuition fees for Arts and Science undergraduate students increased by a total 227.6%, as seen in Table 4.4. This compares to the Canadian average of 182.8%, and Saskatchewan was the province with the second highest percentage increase in the country – second only to Alberta.

Table 4.4 Average University Tuition Fees for Undergraduate Arts and Science Students, 1990-91, 2004-05, and Percentage Change for 1990-91 to 2004-05; Canada and Provinces

	1990/91	2004/05	1990/91 to 2004/05
	Current \$		% change
Canada	1,464	4,140	182.8
Newfoundland and Labrador	1,344	2,606	93.9
Prince Edward Island	1,874	4,374	133.4
Nova Scotia	1,941	6,003	209.3
New Brunswick	1,925	4,719	145.1
Quebec	904	1,888	108.8
Ontario	1,680	4,831	187.6
Manitoba	1,512	3,236	114.0
Saskatchewan	1,545	5,062	227.6
Alberta	1,286	4,940	284.1
British Columbia	1,808	4,735	161.9

Source: Statistics Canada, "University tuition fees 2005-06", *The Daily Thursday*, September 1, 2005. (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2005).
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/050901/dq050901a-eng.htm>

Student loan programming also experienced some dramatic shifts in approach throughout the fourteen year period. Programming went from being focused on loans to grants and then back to loans again... followed by the federal government's introduction of the Canada Millennium Scholarship funding which took the place of some previous provincial bursary support. Additionally, more funds were made available for students considered to be at greatest risk of not accessing and finishing post-secondary study – those with disabilities, students with dependents, those of Aboriginal descent, and first generation students as well as female graduate students in under-represented disciplines.

There is evidence that members of the policy community did work together – or at least not in opposition to each other – occasionally throughout this period. For the two students' unions, there were times when they would work together – primarily in the early 1990s and moving into the 2000s – but fundamentally their ideological approaches and understandings of the purpose of students' unions (and their membership in national-level bodies) meant that they worked against each other. At different times in this period, there were collaborations between students and university administrators, which also sometimes included faculty associations and university staff. As provincial – and then federal – grants were cut to the universities, student leaders often spoke up in support of the universities, arguing that they were doing the best they could in an environment created by provincial and federal retrenchment. However, by the later 1990s, the university administrations were clearly seen by students' unions as the “enemy” – the cause of the tuition fee increase, despite increasing provincial grants and pressure from government toward the universities.

In terms of the relationship between public opinion and public policy, the Saskatchewan government seemed to respond to increased pressure from the public to decrease tuition fees and increase accessibility by shifting the public discourse around the benefits of post-secondary education. Emphasis on the personal benefits of post-secondary education – and the “reasonable” nature of student debt levels – were provided to help counter public demand for decreasing fees. Government also began comparing Saskatchewan’s tuition fee levels to those of other Canadian provinces and reporting them as a proportion of operating expenses – working to reframe university tuition fees in a relative way, rather than as an absolute.

The Saskatchewan government also responded to public opinion by emphasizing available student assistance. Throughout this time period, the link between student loan programming and the funding available to support students was emphasized whenever concerns were raised about tuition fees. Demands for decreasing tuition fees were almost always countered by government announcing changes to the ways in which “needy” students were funded, or providing information on other costs that students might incur, like housing, to make the point that tuition fees were only one part of the costs associated with post-secondary education.

However, while government can be seen to be responding – at least indirectly – to public pressures, it is also clear that during much of the 1990s there was little pressure from the public (as expressed through government-commissioned polls) for government to take action in these areas. As the 1990s progressed, tuition fees and access to post-secondary education became more of a concern for a greater number of people. This growing awareness of and concern for post-secondary education was

reflected in the 1999 election party platforms, and the discussion that took place throughout that election.

Despite this, there does seem to be some support for the democratic responsiveness model, at least indirectly. As the government has been very clear about maintaining the universities' ability to determine tuition fees, the public's concerns about tuition fees have been mediated through elected officials and through the political parties themselves. The 1999 decision of both the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party to include promises around tuition fees in their election platforms are clearly linked to the public's concerns about high fees and access to education. And the 2005 decision to freeze university tuition fees and provide additional funds to the universities to replace the frozen fees through the Centennial Tuition Grant, while outside the parameters of this project, clearly relates to the pressure government was facing from students within the policy community.

Overall, the policy history shows that the relationship between public opinion and public policy in these particular areas is messy, in flux, and firmly situated in a larger economic, social, and political environment. These ideas – and the policy actors' perceptions of them – will be further explored in Chapters 5 and 6, which present the findings from the self-administered questionnaires and interviews with Saskatchewan policy actors.

CHAPTER 5

DEFINING AND MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

Introduction

In order to better understand some of the important characteristics of the policy community group members participating in this study, Chapter 5 begins by describing the characteristics of the sample for both the questionnaire and the interviews. This provides a picture of the different policy community groups in the study, whose characteristics are used to explore differences in perceptions around the value and utility of public opinion in policy-making. The next section will provide the results of univariate and bivariate analysis, focused on how group participants – political actors – define public opinion and value and utilize different expressions of public opinion. The research questions and hypotheses that will be addressed in this chapter include the following:

1. How do political actors define public opinion?

What are the most important measures for different groups of actors?

H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways.

H2: In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups. It is possible that knowing that the product of the public opinion research is to be automatically publicly released – without

waiting for a citizen to submit a Freedom of Information request – may have an impact both on what questions are asked and on the impact of their results.

After presenting the results of the data analysis, the question of whether or not these hypotheses can be accepted or rejected – and the research questions fully answered – will be determined with the available data. It is vital to remember that this is a small sample, so when percentages are reported the number of responses or respondents is also provided to provide a reminder of the size of the sample.

It is important to note at this point that there are some limitations of the sample that will become evident throughout this first set of results. First, the interview and questionnaire samples are not identical. While they are virtually identical, it is possible to know in most cases

- 1) whether a particular respondent participated in both the questionnaire and the interview; or
- 2) whether a particular respondent chose not to participate in the interview, unless s/he specified that wish.

However, it is not possible to know if some respondents participated in both the interview and the questionnaire – or just the questionnaire or just the interview – if the respondent returned the consent form separately from the questionnaire. This had been unanticipated, and made it impossible to fully identify overlap between the questionnaire and the interview samples.

There are some noticeable differences between the two samples: while Deputy Ministers are well represented in the questionnaire, they are absent from the interview sample. As might be anticipated with a larger population to sample, there are more

student union representatives than any other group represented in both the questionnaire and interview samples. While it was certainly hoped that the same people would participate in both parts of the research, and it is unfortunate that it is not always possible to talk about the highest-level civil servants in terms of the questions asked in the interview, these absences do not negate the research findings – they do, however, speak to the need for further research. The results are then reported – whether from the questionnaire or the interview samples – based on their particular denominators (whether # responses or # respondents, depending on what is being measured) within the individual questions whether reporting frequencies or responses by policy community grouping, using percentages for comparison. Numbers of responses or respondents are also reported, as people may not have consistently answered all parts of a question or questions (changing the denominator), which results in a different percentage being reported.

Demographics

In the questionnaire, five measures were used to assess the role and timing of a respondent's participation in the policy community as well as their sex, age, and self-assessed political ideology. With one exception, all interviewees also completed a self-directed questionnaire. Because it was possible to link the interviews with completed questionnaires, it was possible (with one exception) to also transfer the demographic information from the questionnaire data file to the interview data file. Demographics have been calculated for both groups, and any differences between the interview and questionnaire samples are highlighted throughout this section.

Questionnaire Respondents

Ministerial Assistants

Of the two Ministerial Assistants who participated in the questionnaire, one was male and the other female. Both fall into the 45 to 54 age group, and both located themselves at 3 on the political ideology scale of 1 (left) to 7 (right). The two former Ministerial Assistants were both active in the years between 1990 and 1999 in the Devine and/or Romanow governments.⁵⁸

Elected Officials

The two elected officials who completed the questionnaire were both male, with one falling between the ages of 55 and 64 and the other in the 65 and older category. When asked about their positioning on the political ideology scale, one placed himself at 2 and the other at 3: both to the left of centre. The two were active between the years 1995 and 2003, or during Premier Romanow's second term and Premier Calvert's first term.

Deputy Ministers

All four deputy ministers are male, and fall between the ages of 45 to 54 (n=1) and 55 to 64 (n=3). Of the three who answered the political ideology question, two placed themselves at 3 on the 1 to 7 scale while the other one place himself at 4 (centre). The deputy minister respondents reported being active at different points

⁵⁸ While it is possible to further break down the timeframe these respondents were participating in these particular policy community roles, this will not be done in order to ensure respondent confidentiality.

between the 1991 and 2004 period, covering both Premier Romanow's two terms in government and Premier Calvert's two terms in government.

Senior Civil Servants

Of the ten senior civil servants in the questionnaire sample, six are female (60%) and four are male (40%). There is much more variation among this group than there is in some of the smaller groups, both in terms of age and political ideology. One (10%) falls into the 35 to 44 age category, two (20%) into the 45 to 54 age category, six (60%) into the 55 to 64 age category, and one (10%) in the 65 and older category. In terms of political ideology, two (22%) placed themselves at 2 on the 1 (left) to 7 (right) scale, five (56%) at the 3, one (11%) at 4, and one (11%) at 5. The ten civil servants were active throughout the 1990 to 2004 time period, with more than average being involved in the civil service during the time period of the study.

Media

The three male media respondents are located within the 45 to 54 (n=1) and 55 to 64 (n=2) age groups. None of the three answered the question about political ideology, as might be expected from media personnel who focus on their need to be (or to be seen to be) objective. The respondents were active throughout the 1990 to 2004 time period.

Public Opinion Researchers

Both public opinion researchers are male, with one in the 45 to 54 age category and the other in the 55 to 64 age category. Interestingly, both placed themselves at 5 on the 1 (left) to 7 (right) political ideology scale. The two were active at different points in the 1990 to 2004 time period, although there was a great deal of overlap in the times that they were active.

University Presidents

The three university president respondents are all male, ranging in age from 55 to 64 (n=2) and 65 and older (n=1). They are varied in terms of political ideology, with one placing himself at 3, another at 4, and the last at 6 on the 1 (left) to 7 (right) scale. Their activities as university presidents ranged from 1990 to 2004.

Student Union Representatives

Half of the student union representatives (n=5) are male and half (n=5) are female. As anticipated, because of the roles they held and the traditional ages of university participants, these respondents are primarily in the 25 to 34 (n=8) and the 35 to 44 (n=2) age groups. They are quite varied in terms of their political ideology, with half (n=5) placing themselves at 2, two at 3, one at 4, and two at 5 on the 1 (left) to 7 (right) scale. This might help to explain some of the visible conflict between student union representatives and university presidents during this time period. The majority of these respondents were active between 1995 and 2004, but there was one respondent

who had been active during the 1991 to 1995 time period (Premier Romanow's first term).

Interview Respondents

Ministerial Assistants

The Ministerial Assistants participating in the interview sample also participated in the questionnaire sample, so their characteristics are identical.

Elected Officials

There were three elected officials participating in the interview: one more than had completed questionnaires. In the interview, there was an additional elected official: thus, there were two males and one female, with two falling between the ages of 55 and 64 and the third in the 65 and older category. When asked about their positioning on the political ideology scale, one placed him/herself at 2, another at 3, and the third was not identified. The two that were identified are both to the left of centre. All three were active between the years 1995 and 2003, or during Premier Romanow's second term and Premier Calvert's first term.

Deputy Ministers

No deputy ministers participated in the interview process.

Senior Civil Servants

Of the eight senior civil servants in the interview sample, three (38%) are male and five (62%) are female – roughly the same proportions as in the questionnaire sample (40% male, 60% female). As with the questionnaire sample, there is more variation within this group than there is in some of the smaller groups, both in terms of age and political ideology. One (13%) falls into the 35 to 44 age category, two (25%) into the 45 to 54 age category, four (50%) into the 55 to 64 age category, and one (13%) in the 65 and older category. These are almost identical proportions to those in the questionnaire sample. In terms of political ideology, two (25%) placed themselves at 2 on the 1 (left) to 7 (right) scale, four (50%) at the 3, one (13%) at 4, and one (13%) who did not identify where s/he was located. The eight civil servants were active throughout the 1990 to 2004 time period.

Media

Two of the three media questionnaire respondents also participated in the interview process. Both are male, and are located within the 45 to 54 age group. Neither of the two answered the question about political ideology. The respondents were active throughout the 1990 to 2004 time period.

Public Opinion Researchers

The public opinion researchers included in the interview group also participated in the questionnaire, so their characteristics are identical.

University Presidents

The university presidents participating in the interview also participated in the questionnaire, so their characteristics are identical.

Student Union Representatives

Seven of the ten questionnaire respondents also participated in the interview process. For the interview sample, just under half (43%) are male and over half (57%) are female. This is fairly close to the questionnaire sample, which was half and half male and female. The interview respondents fall into the 25 to 34 age group, losing the 35 to 44 year old respondents of the questionnaire sample. They are quite varied in terms of their political ideology, with just under half (43%, n=3) placing themselves at 2, one at 3 (14%), one at 4 (14%), one at 5 (14%), and one did not identify where s/he fits on the 1 (left) to 7 (right) scale. This again is quite similar to the overall breakdown amongst the questionnaire sample. The majority of these respondents were active between 1995 and 2004, but there is one respondent who had been active during the 1991 to 1995 time period (Premier Romanow's first term).

Conclusions: Demographics of the Respondents

As anticipated, there is a quite a bit of variation among the groups in all demographic characteristics. In terms of age, university presidents, ministerial assistants, public opinion researchers, and elected officials tend to be in the 45 and older categories exclusively. Student union representatives are the youngest group of respondents. In terms of sex, the split between men and women is fairly even, although

there are only men in the university president, deputy minister, public opinion researcher, media, and elected officials (questionnaire; not in interview) groups. More women than men are present in the student union president and senior civil servant categories. In terms of political ideology, overall, both samples are more left of centre than might have been anticipated. However, this may in fact be a reflection of the governments, both student and provincial – and their political leanings – during this time period.

While there are some differences between the questionnaire and interview samples, since fewer respondents participated in the interview than in the questionnaire, these differences are not substantive in all but one instance – the reality that no deputy ministers participated in the interview process. Many were retired and had relocated at the time of the interviews, and some were included in other categories. Others specified that while they were able to complete a questionnaire, they did not have the time to participate in an interview. Overall, the two samples – questionnaire and interview respondents – are similar enough (despite the missing deputy ministers in the interviews) that the data produced through the two instruments will be presented together. With a few exceptions noted earlier (and discussed in the conclusions and methodology sections), the same people participated in both processes.

Defining Public Opinion

Understanding how policy actors define public opinion – and which measures they identify as important – is a key research question for this project. We know that defining public opinion can be a difficult proposition, as the literature shows. One of

the hypotheses for this project is that political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways, which proves to be the case based on the data presented below.

Assessing how political actors define public opinion was done using a series of questions, both in the interview and in the questionnaire. The first part of this section will address the information gathered through the interview, when participants were asked to define public opinion (I3). The following parts of this section will present findings from the questionnaire: how important participants thought various measures of public opinion were for them in their previous positions (Q4), how often they consulted various forms of public opinion (Q5), and how important they think that public opinion measures are for decision-makers in general (Q7). All responses are presented as frequencies and by policy community group.

Defining Public Opinion: The Interview

When asked how they would define public opinion, interviewees provided responses that fell into four broad categories. Their responses focused on the questions who or what is the public (41%, n=28), what is opinion (21%, n=14), what is the focus of public opinion (13%, n=9), and what is important about public opinion measurement (21%, n=14). A final group of responses (4%, n=3) focused on the need to respect or trust public opinion. Given that respondents provided multiple responses to this question, reporting is based on the total number of responses rather than on respondents.

Who or What is the Public?

The largest proportion (41%, n=28) of responses to the question around defining public opinion focused on defining who or what is the public. Among those focusing on defining the public, over one-third (36%, n=10) of interviewees' responses first pointed to the public as either segmented or not monolithic, rather than being homogenous, while an additional one-third of responses (36%, n=10) focused on the public as being “the public”, the “general public”, or the “general population” (see Figure 5.1). Over one in ten responses (11%, n=3) pointed to the public as a people tied to a particular jurisdiction or government, while 7% (n=2) of responses were that the public was the majority. The rest of the interviewees' responses reported that the public was a group defined as separate from the media or individuals (4%, n=1), a specific public of interest (4%, n=1), or an aggregation of individuals (4%, n=1).

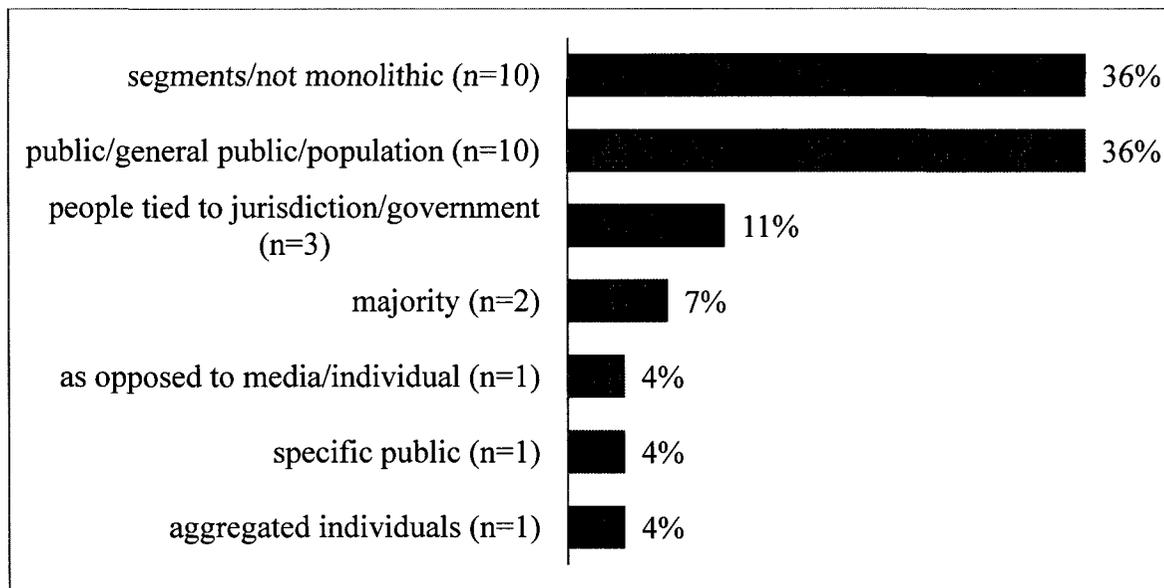


Figure 5.1: Definitions of Public Opinion: Who or What is the Public? (% of responses; n=28)

There are also noticeable differences among the members of the various policy community groups in terms of their assessment of who or what the public is. All of the Ministerial Assistants' responses (n=2) emphasized the public as synonymous with the "general public" or the population. Elected officials were more divided, with one-quarter of responses (25%, n=1) focused on the public as an aggregation of individuals, a further one-quarter of responses (25%, n=1) noting that the public is segmented and not monolithic, while one-half of the responses (50%, n=2) provided pointed to the public as being identified with the population or the general public. Senior civil servants were split as well, with just over one in ten (11%, n=1) of their responses identifying the public as the majority, just over one in ten (11%, n=1) stating that the public was identified in opposition to the media or to the individual, just over one-third (34%, n=3) pointed to the general public or population, and over four in ten (44%, n=4) of the responses emphasized that the public is made up of segments and not monolithic.

Two-thirds (67%, n=2) of media responses focused on the public being made up of segments and not monolithic, while one-third (33%, n=1) stated that the public was made up of aggregated individuals. All public opinion researchers' responses (n=1) focused on the need to identify the public as being segmented, and not monolithic. University presidents' responses fell equally into four categories: the public as an aggregation of individuals (25%, n=1), as the general public or population (25%, n=1), as segments rather than monolithic (25%, n=1), and as a people tied to a particular jurisdiction or government (25%, n=1). Finally, student union representatives' responses were perhaps the most varied of all of the groups in the policy community. Over one in ten responses (14%, n=1) focused either on the public as majority, the

public as segments rather than monolithic (14%, n=1), or the public as a specifically identified group of people (14%, n=1). Just over one-quarter of responses (29%, n=2) identified either the public as general public or population or as people tied to a jurisdiction or government (29%, n=2).

What is Opinion?

Just over two in ten (21%, n=14) of the responses given focused on the nature of opinion, which seemed to be a difficult term to define for the interview participants. Over one-third (38%, n=5) of those responses defined opinion simply as “opinion” (see Figure 5.2), perhaps speaking to the lack of clarity around public opinion or to the extremely common use of the word opinion. Just under one-quarter (23%, n=3) of responses spoke to opinion as views, while the remaining responses addressed opinion as thoughts (15%, n=2), assumptions (8%, n=1), values/interests (8%, n=1), mood (8%, n=1), or as being changeable (8%, n=1).

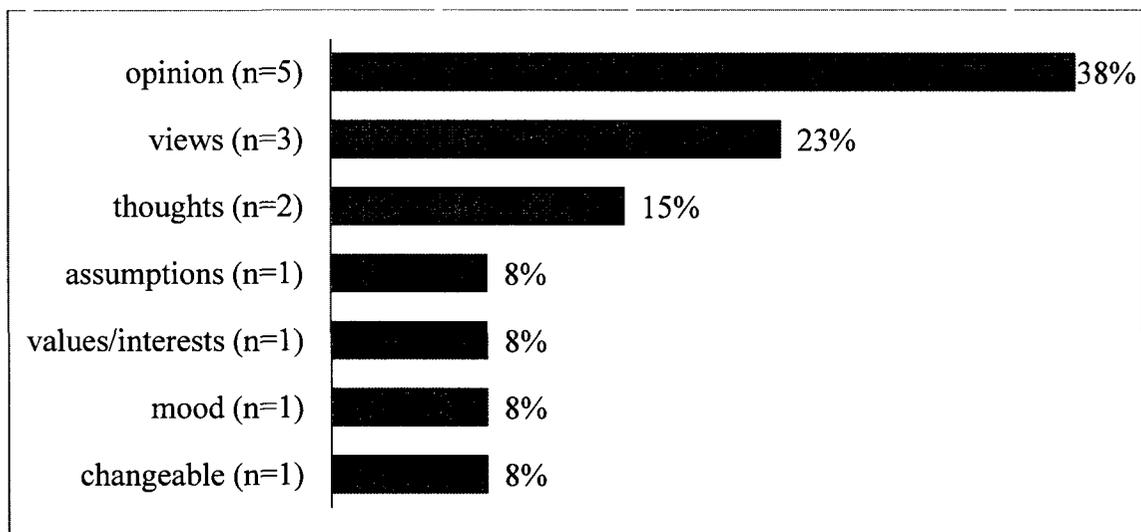


Figure 5.2: Definitions of Public Opinion: What is Opinion? (% of responses; n=14)

There were some differences among policy community groups when it came to their responses around opinion. Of note, five of the eight groups mentioned something specifically about the nature of opinion: elected officials, senior civil servants, media respondents, university presidents and student union representatives. Elected officials' responses focused on opinion as values/interests (25%, n=1), views (25%, n=1), opinion (25%, n=1), and as changeable (25%, n=1). Senior civil servants' responses pointed to opinion as values/interests (25%, n=1), thoughts (25%, n=1), views (25%, n=1), and opinion (25%, n=1). Media responses identified opinion simply as opinion (100%, n=1). University presidents said that opinion was simply opinion (50%, n=1) and thoughts (50%, n=1), while student union representatives referred to views (50%, n=1) and assumptions (50%, n=1).

What is the Focus of Public Opinion?

Just over one in ten (13%, n=9) of the total responses around how public opinion is defined addressed the focus of public opinion. Of these responses, most responses noted that public opinion addresses everything (22%, n=2), is focused on discussion of issue A versus issue B (22%, n=2), or is focused on a particular issue (22%, n=2) (see Figure 5.3). The rest pointed to public opinion as being focused around discussion on the best course of action (11%, n=1), a policy or program (11%, n=1), or on good or bad decisions (11%, n=1).

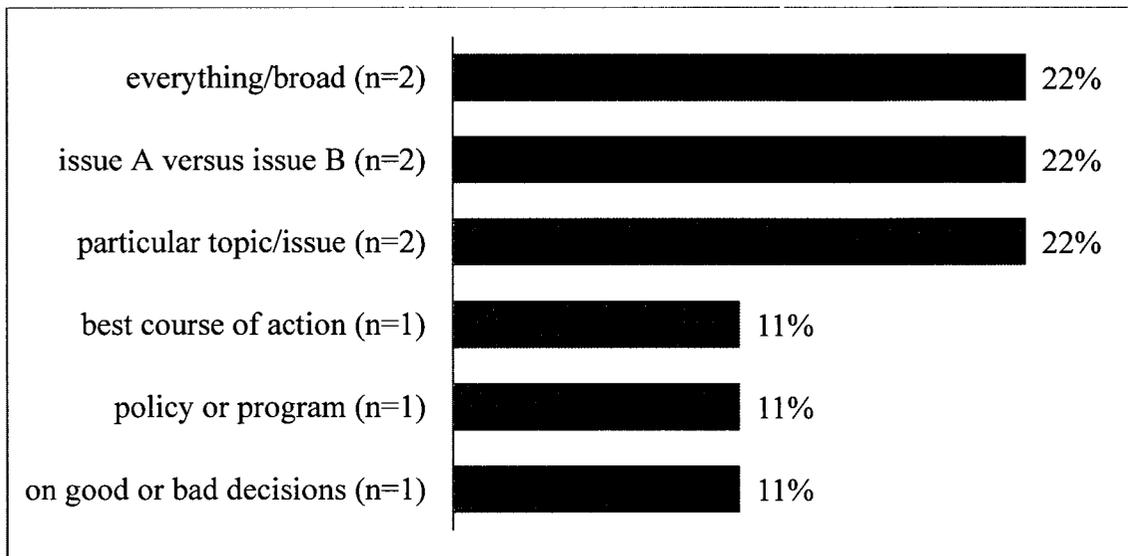


Figure 5.3: Definitions of Public Opinion: What is the Focus of Public Opinion? (% of responses; n=9)

Members of four of the policy community groups had something to say about the focus of public opinion: elected officials, senior civil servants, university presidents, and student union representatives. Elected officials' responses were divided among focus on policy or program (33%, n=1), best course of action (33%, n=1), and a particular topic of issue (33%, n=1). Senior civil servants' responses were that public opinion focused on good or bad decisions (33%, n=1) and on everything (67%, n=2) – the broadest perspective of public opinion's focus. University presidents' responses saw public opinion as being focused on issue A versus issue B, while student union representatives' responses were split between public opinion being focused on a particular topic or issue (50%, n=1) or on issue A versus issue B (50%, n=1). It seems that this is a particularly good example of when definitions of public opinion's focus clearly reflect the needs and the focus of members of particular policy community groups.

How is Public Opinion Measured?

About one-fifth (21%, n=14) of the comments about defining public opinion related to measurement. These comments included the acknowledgement that not one source of public opinion is more important than others (43%, n=6), references to opinion being gathered (14%, n=2), synonymous with a poll or survey (14%, n=2), measurement of opinion as a snapshot (7%, n=1), being freely expressed (7%, n=1), and expressed in a variety of different ways (7%, n=1). Some responses (7%, n=1) focused on issues with measuring public opinion (see Figure 5.4 on the next page).

Members of six of the eight policy community groups provided information on measurement when asked about defining public opinion. Ministerial assistants' responses focused on the need to freely express public opinion (50%, n=1) and on public opinion as a snapshot (50%, n=1). Elected officials' responses emphasized that not one source of public opinion is more important than others (67%, n=2) and that public opinion must be gathered (33%, n=1). Senior civil servants stated that not one source is more important than others (33%, n=1), that public opinion is expressed in a variety of different ways (33%, n=1), and that there are issues with measurement (33%, n=1).

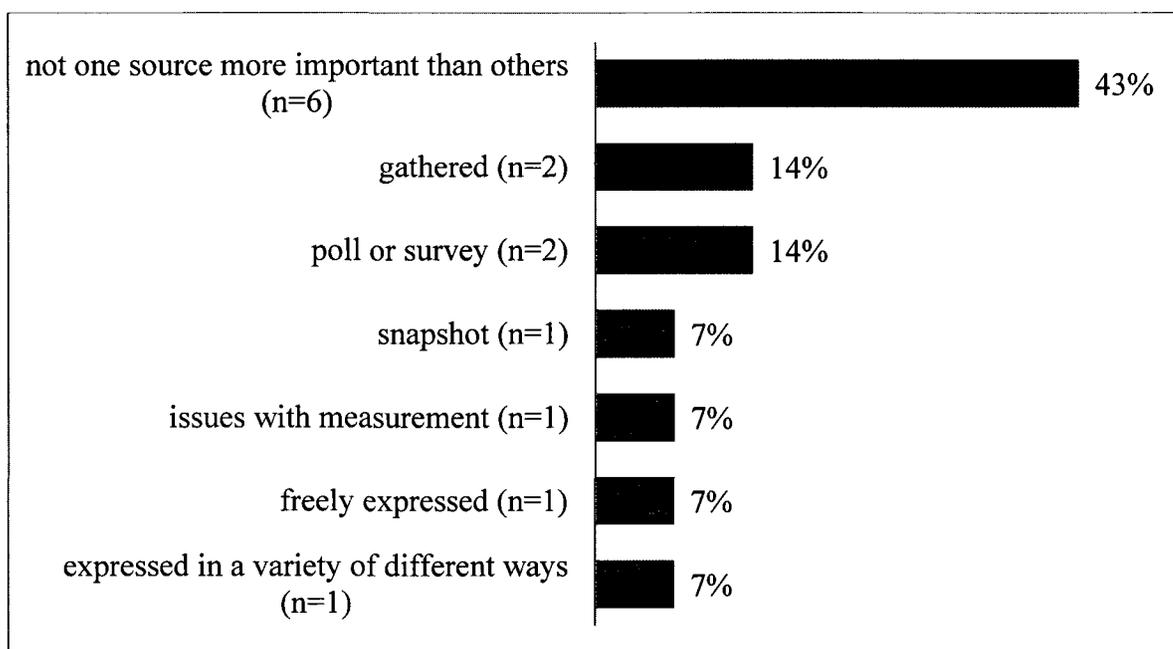


Figure 5.4: Definitions of Public Opinion: Public Opinion Measurement (% of responses; n=14)

Public opinion researchers' responses were focused completely on ensuring that not one source is more important than others in public opinion research. University presidents mentioned that not one source is more important than others (33%, n=1), public opinion is synonymous with poll or survey (33%, n=1), and that public opinion can be expressed in a variety of ways (33%, n=1). Finally, student union representatives' responses fell into three themes: public opinion as synonymous with poll or survey (33%, n=1), public opinion as being gathered (33%, n=1), and public opinion being expressed in a variety of different ways (33%, n=1). This focus on a variety of ways of measuring public opinion may indicate a number of things: a love/hate relationship with polling (as will be indicated time and again when respondents talk about the limitations of polling, and the dangers of being too heavily reliant on it); it may also address concerns about relationships with stakeholder groups

and the information coming from them vis-à-vis more public sources; it may allow them to ignore certain sources more readily; and finally, it may also reflect concern about the weight of one source over another if it does not support their approach or their position in a particular policy direction.

Assessing the Previous and General Importance of Various Measures and Frequency of Their Use

Having provided information on how policy group members define public opinion – including how they understand the public, the nature of opinion, how public opinion is measured, and its focus – we turn to how policy group members think about the overall importance of various public opinion measures, their previous assessment and use of these measures, and what measures are important for decision-makers. Three questions were asked to try to tap into how policy group members assessed the value and utility of public opinion expressions, both for themselves and for decision-makers in general. The results of these questions are explored throughout this section.

Previous Importance of Public Opinion (Q4)

It is anticipated that respondents may have considered certain measures more important than others while they were active in the policy community groups included in this project. These assessments may differ from what they considered to be good reflections of public opinion now (Q3) – particularly since good measures might not be important, and important measures might not be good ones. Thus, this section focuses on how they conceived of various measures of public opinion when they held the positions indicated in this project.

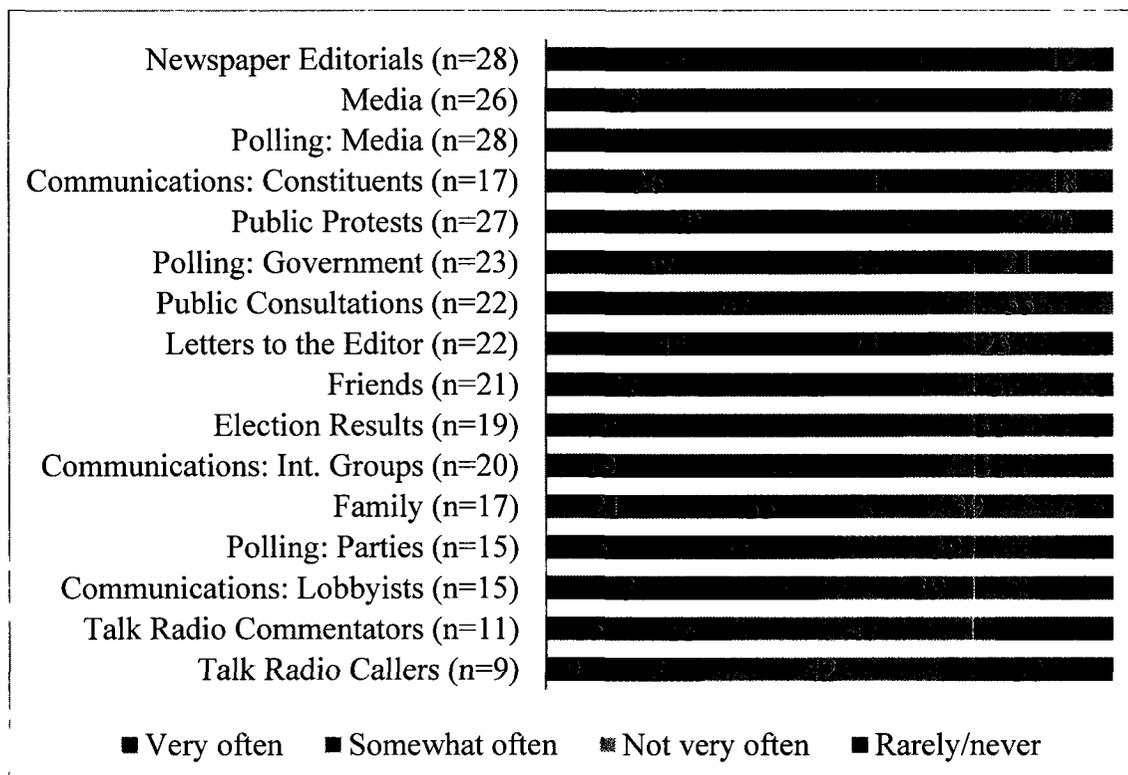


Figure 5.5: Previous Importance of Public Opinion (% of respondents; n=9-32)

As can be seen in Figure 5.5 above, respondents were most likely to have identified communications from constituents (96%, n=22), polling made public by the media (91%, n=29), polling commissioned by government (88%, n=28), followed by public protests and demonstrations (87%, n=32), public consultations (85%, n=27), newspaper editorials (80%, n=27), media (75%, n=25), letters to the editor (74%, n=25), election results (71%, n=23), friends (71%, n=23), family (65%, n=21), polling commissioned by parties (63%, n=18), lobbyists' communications (59%, n=19), interest/advocacy group communications (52%, n=16) as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work in the policy community. Fewer than half

identified talk radio callers (38%, n=13) or talk radio commentators (32%, n=11) as being very or somewhat important expressions of public opinion in their previous work.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of variation among respondents on this question, chi-square testing was used to assess the relationships between the assessed measures as important expressions of public opinion in their previous work and policy community group membership, presented in rank order by groups as well. Ranking is determined by how many groups agree that a measure of public opinion was an important one in their previous work.

Policy Community Members

All sixteen possible expressions of previously important/not important public opinion were assessed by policy community group. Three of the sixteen showed statistically significant relationships at the $p=.05$ level: letters to the editor ($\chi^2=16.154$, $df=7$, $p=.024$; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5), communications from constituents ($\chi^2=24.0$, $df=7$, $p=.001$; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5), and public protests and demonstrations ($\chi^2=16.485$, $df=7$, $p=.021$; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5).

For letters to the editor, ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), deputy ministers (50%, n=2), public opinion researchers (50%, n=1), and university presidents (0%) were less likely to indicate that they would have had previously been very or somewhat important in their work. Elected officials (100%, n=2), senior civil servants (100%, n=9), media (100%, n=3), and student union representatives (80%, n=8) were more

likely to indicate that they would have had previously been very or somewhat important in their work.

The statistically significant differences among policy community groups were evident when it came to assessing the previous importance of communications from constituents. Seven of the eight groups – ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=1), senior civil servants (100%, n=6), media (100%, n=1), university presidents (100%, n=2), and student union representatives (100%, n=9) – all were more likely than average (96%) to report that communications from constituents were very or somewhat important in their previous work. Only public opinion researchers were less likely (0% compared with 96% overall) to report this. Since the seven groups are the ones most likely to have defined constituents, this result is in line with expectations.

For public protests and demonstrations, ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), senior civil servants (100%, n=9), media (100%, n=3), university presidents (100%, n=3), and student union representatives (100%, n=9) were more likely to report that they were somewhat or very important in their previous work, while public opinion researchers (50%, n=1) were less likely to do so.

One of the sixteen expressions of previously important/not important public opinion showed statistically significant relationships at the $p=.10$ level: media communications ($\chi^2=12.547$, $df=7$, $p=.084$; 88% of cells had an expected count of less than 5). For media communications, ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), media (100%, n=3), and student union representatives (90%,

n=9) were more likely to have reported these as being very or somewhat important, while elected officials (0%), senior civil servants (56%, n=5), public opinion researchers (50%, n=1), and university presidents (67%, n=2) were less likely to have done so.

However, although there were no other statistically significant differences, there were noticeable distinctions and commonalities among policy community groups when it came to opinions about the importance (very or somewhat, not very or not at all) of various expressions of public opinion as a reflection of public opinion in their previous policy community work. These distinctions and commonalities are presented by policy community group below.

Ministerial Assistants

Although a very small group (n=2), Ministerial Assistants assessed expressions of public opinion remarkably similarly. They were quite different from other policy community groups because of their cohesion around the nine expressions that they considered were very or somewhat good reflections of public opinion. Both agreed that newspaper editorials, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations were very or somewhat important to them in their previous work as Ministerial Assistants in the post-secondary education field.

The Ministerial Assistants were split on the importance of the following expressions of public opinion: letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, friends, family, lobbyists' communications, and election results. This may be a reflection of some of the Ministerial Assistants' personal characteristics and their different portfolios, even though they were active around the same time and worked for the same Minister.⁵⁹

Elected Officials

Ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education (n=2) agreed on the importance (very or somewhat) of eleven expressions of public opinion for them as ministers. These included newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. They also agreed that talk radio commentators and media communications were not very or not at all important for them in their work as ministers with responsibility for post-secondary education.

However, there was disagreement on the importance of talk radio callers, interest/advocacy group communications, and lobbyists' communications, with one respondent considering these important and the other not important. This may be a product (in part) of the time each of these ministers was serving, and the issues within the policy community at the time. It may also reflect their interpersonal relationships within the community.

⁵⁹ This may also be a reflection of the work that the two Ministerial Assistants currently do now; both inside and outside of government.

Deputy Ministers

Seven of the sixteen expressions of public opinion were considered very or somewhat important by all of the deputy minister respondents (n=4). These included newspaper editorials, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations.

Two-thirds of the deputy minister respondents (67%, n=2) identified polling commissioned by political parties, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications as being very or somewhat important, while half (50%, n=2) reported that letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, and election results as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work as deputy ministers in post-secondary education. One-third considered talk radio callers, friends, and family as being very or somewhat important. There were no expressions of public opinion that were considered not very or not at all important by all of the deputy ministers.

Senior Civil Servants

Senior civil servants (n=9) agreed on four expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important in their previous work in the public service: letters to the editor, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, and public protests and demonstrations. Between three-quarters and nine in ten of the public servants reported the following expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important in previous work: newspaper editorials (89%, n=8); polling made public/commissioned by the media (88%, n=7); polling commissioned by

political parties (83%, n=5); friends (78%, n=7); family (78%, n=7); and election results (78%, n=7).

Just over half (56%, n=7) of the public servants identified media communications as being very or somewhat important in their previous work. Under half reported the following as being very or somewhat important: talk radio callers (44%, n=4); interest/advocacy group communications (44%, n=4); and talk radio commentators (33%, n=3). There were no expressions of public opinion that public servants all agreed were not at all or not very important in their previous work.

Media

All media respondents (n=3) agreed on seven expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work: letters to the editor, friends, family, communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, and public protests and demonstrations. Two of the three identified newspaper editorials, talk radio callers, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, lobbyists' communications, election results, and public consultations as being very or somewhat important for them in their work.

All three reported that talk radio commentators and interest/advocacy group communications were not very or not at all important for them in their previous work as media personnel reporting on post-secondary education.

Public Opinion Researchers

The two public opinion researchers agreed that polling commissioned by the provincial government and polling made public/commissioned by the media were very or somewhat important for their previous work. However, the two were split on the importance of eleven of the sixteen measures of public opinion: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations.

Both agreed that friends, family, and communications from constituents were not very or not at all important for them in their previous work as public opinion researchers working in the policy community.

University Presidents

The three university presidents agreed on three of the measures of public opinion as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work as university presidents: communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, and public protests and demonstrations. Two of the three identified newspaper editorials, friends, polling commissioned by the provincial government, media communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, and public consultations as being very or somewhat important for them.

One out of the three pointed to talk radio commentators and family as being very or somewhat important for their previous work, while all agreed that talk radio

callers, polling commissioned by political parties, interest/advocacy group communications were not very or not at all important for their previous work.

Student Union Representatives

The student union representatives (n=10) fully agreed on three measures of public opinion as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work with the student unions: communications from constituents, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. These expressions of opinion are likely to reflect the focus of many student union representatives during this time. There was a great deal of diversity within this group in terms of what they assessed as important or not important. Between three-quarters and nine in ten assessed media communications (90%, n=9), letters to the editor (80%, n=8), friends (80%, n=8), polling commissioned by the provincial government (78%, n=7), polling made public/commissioned by the media (78%, n=7), interest/advocacy group communications (78%, n=7), and election results (78%, n=7) as being somewhat or very important for their previous work with the student unions.

Between half and three-quarters reported that newspaper editorials (70%, n=7), family (70%, n=7), polling commissioned by political parties (56%, n=5), and lobbyists' communications (50%, n=5) were very or somewhat important for their previous work. Fewer than half pointed to talk radio commentators (30%, n=3) or talk radio callers (30%, n=3) as being very or somewhat important. There were no expressions of public opinion that all former student union representatives considered not at all or not very important.

Conclusions: Previous Importance of Public Opinion (Q4)

As noted previously, there was some level of agreement among respondents when identifying which measures of opinion were important to them in their previous work in the higher education policy community. Over half identified communications from constituents (96%, n=22), polling made public by the media (91%, n=29), polling commissioned by government (88%, n=28), followed by public protests and demonstrations (87%, n=32), public consultations (85%, n=27), newspaper editorials (80%, n=27), media (75%, n=25), letters to the editor (74%, n=25), election results (71%, n=23), friends (71%, n=23), family (65%, n=21), polling commissioned by parties (63%, n=18), lobbyists' communications (59%, n=19), interest/advocacy group communications (52%, n=16) as being very or somewhat important for them in their previous work in the policy community. Fewer than half identified talk radio callers (38%, n=13) or talk radio commentators (32%, n=11) as being very or somewhat important expressions of public opinion in their previous work.

While there was not unanimous agreement on any of the measures of public opinion when asked to assess which had been important in respondents' previous work, there were some measures that drew greater agreement than others. In particular, seven of the eight groups from the policy community pointed to public protests and demonstrations and communications from constituents as being important in their previous work, followed closely by polling made public/commissioned by the media (six groups) and polling commissioned by the government (five groups). In terms of importance, it seems that the groups were responding to measures of opinion that were likely to be indicators of a shift in agenda.

How Often Respondents Consulted Public Opinion (Q5)

An indication of how important a measure of public opinion is for a policy community member is how frequently they consulted it. While respondents may not have considered a measure “important” for the work they were doing at the time, it may still have been frequently observed. There are limitations to this approach, however, as information may only be observed as frequently as it is made available or accessible.

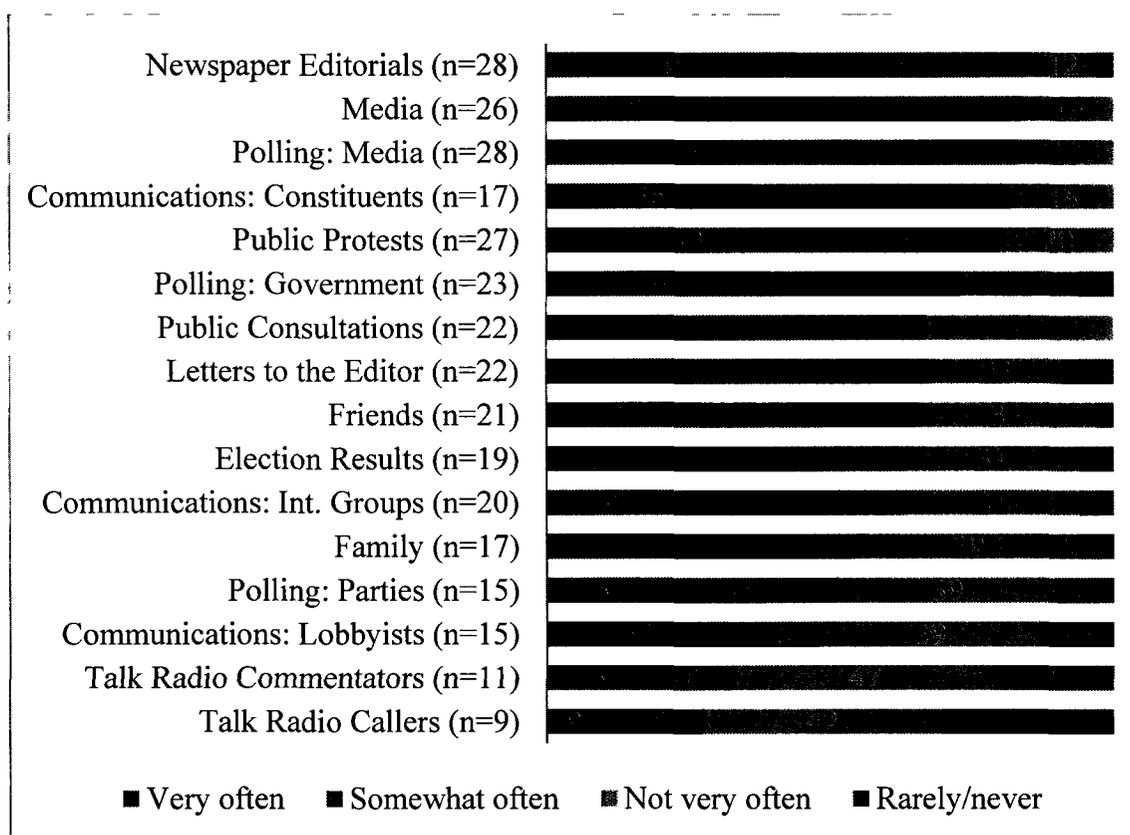


Figure 5.6: How Often Respondents Consulted Public Opinion (% of respondents; n=9-28)

As can be seen in Figure 5.6 above, respondents were most likely to report consulting newspaper editorials (85%, n=28), media (84%, n=26), polling made public by the media (83%, n=28), communications from constituents (82%, n=17), public

protests and demonstrations (80%, n=28), followed by consulting polling commissioned by government (72%, n=23), public consultations (67%, n=27), letters to the editor (67%, n=22), friends (65%, n=21), election results (63%, n=19), interest/advocacy group communications (63%, n=20), family (54%, n=17), and polling commissioned by parties (51%, n=15) either very or somewhat often. Fewer than half identified lobbyists' communications (48%, n=15), talk radio commentators (33%, n=11) and talk radio callers (27%, n=9) as being measures of public opinion consulted very or somewhat often.

Policy Community Membership

In order to gain a clearer understanding of variation among respondents on this question, chi-square testing was used to assess the relationships between how often the assessed measures of public opinion were consulted and policy community group membership. There were some significant differences among the members of the policy community. The relationship between newspaper editorials and policy community was significant at the .05 level ($\chi^2=14.268$; $df=7$; $p=.047$; 88% with cells less than 5), while the relationships between friends and policy community ($\chi^2=12.155$; $df=7$; $p=.096$; 100% with cells less than 5) and public consultations and policy community ($\chi^2=3$; $df=1$; $p=.083$; 100% with cells less than 5) were significant at the .10 level.

Ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), media (100%, n=3), and university presidents (100%, n=3) were much more likely to indicate that they consulted newspaper editorials very or somewhat often. Senior civil servants were slightly more likely to indicate that they consulted

newspaper editorials very or somewhat often (88%, n=7). Public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) were much less likely and student union representatives (80%, n=8) were slightly less likely to consult newspaper editorials often.

Elected officials (100%, n=2), media (100%, n=3), university presidents (100%, n=3), and student union representatives (80%, n=8) were more likely than average (65%) to report that they consulted friends very or somewhat often. Ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), deputy ministers (33%, n=1), senior civil servants (44%, n=4), and public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) were less likely than average (65%) to report that they consulted friends as an expression of public opinion very or somewhat often.

Relatively few respondents overall reported that public consultations were consulted very or somewhat often, but deputy ministers (100%, n=2) were much more likely than public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) to have indicated that they did consult public consultations very or somewhat often. This may be a reflection of the time period in which the various respondents were active, since public consultations on post-secondary education did not take place regularly throughout this time period.

Ministerial Assistants

Not surprisingly, both Ministerial Assistants reported that they had consulted newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, election results, and public protests and

demonstrations very or somewhat often. The need to be aware of the political environment would be paramount for Ministerial Assistants.

One of the two Ministerial Assistants reported that they would consult talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, friends, family, and communications from constituents very or somewhat often. Neither reported following public consultations at all, which, as with other respondents, may reflect the lack of public consultations held in this particular policy area.

Elected Officials

Elected officials (n=2) reported consulting eight different expressions of public opinion very or somewhat often: polling made public/commissioned by the media, election results, public protests and demonstrations, newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, family, and communications from constituents. One of the two elected officials stated that they consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, and lobbyists' communications very or somewhat often. None of the elected officials reported consulting talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, or public consultations often.

Deputy Ministers

Deputy Ministers (n=4) reported that they had consulted seven different expressions of public opinion very or somewhat often: newspaper editorials, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial

government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. Between half and three-quarters of the deputy ministers reported that they often consulted talk radio commentators (75%, n=3), talk radio callers (67%, n=2), interest/advocacy group communications (67%, n=2), and letters to the editor (50%, n=2). Fewer than half reported consulting friends (33%, n=1), polling commissioned by political parties (33%, n=1), lobbyists' communications (33%, n=1), or election results (33%, n=1) very or somewhat often.

Senior Civil Servants

Senior civil servants (n=8) differed in terms of how often they reported consulting particular expressions of public opinion. Between three-quarters and nine in ten reported consulting newspaper editorials (88%, n=7), polling commissioned by the provincial government (88%, n=7), public protests and demonstrations (78%, n=7), letters to the editor (75%, n=6), communications from constituents (75%, n=3), and polling made public/commissioned by the media (75%, n=6) very or somewhat often. Half to three-quarters reported that they had consulted media communications (63%, n=5), lobbyists' communications (63%, n=5), election results (56%, n=5), and family (50%, n=4) very or somewhat often. Fewer than half indicated that friends (44%, n=4), interest/advocacy group communications (44%, n=4), polling commissioned by political parties (43%, n=4), talk radio callers (38%, n=3), talk radio commentators (25%, n=2), or public consultations (0%, n=0) were consulted very or somewhat often.

Media

Media respondents (n=3) agreed that they had consulted nine different expressions of public opinion very or somewhat often: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, family, communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, election results, and public protests and demonstrations. Two-thirds (n=2) reported consulting talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, and lobbyists' communications very or somewhat often during their time working in this area.

None (0%) of the media group reported observing interest/advocacy group communications or public consultations, which is more than likely a product of what stories they were working on at the time – particularly since Saskatchewan journalists were largely expected to be “jacks/jills of all trades” rather than focusing on post-secondary education, for example – and what activities were occurring at the time than of their interest in or observation of current government and policy community activities.

Public Opinion Researchers

As might be anticipated due in part to their role(s) in the policy community, both public opinion researchers reported very little consultation per se of various forms of public opinion. One of the two respondents reported consulting polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists'

communications, election results, public protests and demonstrations, and polling commissioned by the provincial government very or somewhat often. However, both public opinion researchers agreed that they consulted newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, friends, family, communications from constituents, and public consultations very little or not at all during this time period.

University Presidents

University presidents (n=3) agreed that they consulted newspaper editorials, friends, communications from constituents, and public protests and demonstrations very or somewhat often during their tenure. Two-thirds (n=2) reported consulting family very or somewhat often as a source of public opinion. One in three (33%, n=1) reported consulting letters to the editor, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, and lobbyists' communications. No university president reported consulting polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, election results, and public consultations very or somewhat often.

Student Union Representatives

There was a great deal of diversity among student union representatives (n=10), in terms of how often they consulted various forms of public opinion. All agreed that they consulted polling made public/commissioned by the media very or somewhat often. Over three-quarters reported that they consulted media communications (90%,

n=9), communications from constituents (89%, n=8), newspaper editorials (80%, n=8), and friends (80%, n=8) very or somewhat often.

Between half and three-quarters mentioned letters to the editor (70%, n=7), polling commissioned by the provincial government (67%, n=6), polling commissioned by political parties (67%, n=6), election results (67%, n=6), public protests and demonstrations (60%, n=6), and interest/advocacy group communications (56%, n=5) as being expressions of public opinion that were very or somewhat often consulted. Fewer than half reported that lobbyists' communications (33%, n=3), talk radio commentators (30%, n=3), talk radio callers (10%, n=1), or public consultations (0%, n=0) were very or somewhat often consulted as part of their work as student union representatives. As with other policy community groups, paying attention to infrequently-occurring events like public consultations is likely to vary with the timeframe respondents were involved in the policy community.

Conclusions: How Often Respondents Consulted Public Opinion (Q5)

Overall, there was a great deal of variation among the policy community groups in terms of how often they consulted various measures of public opinion – the most variation of all of the questions assessing value and utility of these measures. However, there were some similarities. Over half of the respondents said that they consulted 13 of the 16 measures of public opinion somewhat or very often. Eight in ten or more reported consulting newspaper editorials (85%, n=28), media (84%, n=26), polling made public by the media (83%, n=28), communications from constituents (82%, n=17), and public protests and demonstrations (80%, n=28). Between half and three-

quarters talked about consulting polling commissioned by government (72%, n=23), public consultations (67%, n=2), letters to the editor (67%, n=22), friends (65%, n=21), election results (63%, n=19), interest/advocacy group communications (63%, n=20), family (54%, n=17), and polling commissioned by parties (51%, n=15) either very or somewhat often. Fewer than half of all respondents identified lobbyists' communications (48%, n=15), talk radio commentators (33%, n=11) and talk radio callers (27%, n=9) as being measures of public opinion consulted very or somewhat often.

The variation among the groups was clear. Members of just over half of the groups agreed that they often consulted newspaper editorials, polling made public by the media, and public protests and demonstrations; while just two of the groups (ministerial assistants and deputy ministers) said that they had very or somewhat often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of the government polling, this may be a reflection of how often polling was done during the 1991 to 2004 time period, and whether or not the polling was specific to the post-secondary education area.

General Importance of Public Opinion Expressions for Decision-Makers (Q7)

Understanding how policy community members assess the importance of various measures of public opinion for decision-makers in general provides an indication of how they might see decision-makers using measures of opinion. As can be seen in Figure 5.7, respondents were most likely to report communications from constituents (100%, n=32), polling commissioned by government (94%, n=31), public

consultations (88%, n=14), public protests and demonstrations (86%, n=30), polling made public by the media (86%, n=29), media (85%, n=28), lobbyists' communications (85%, n=28), family (84%, n=25), polling commissioned by parties (83%, n=29), and interest/advocacy group communications (80%, n=27) as being important measures of public opinion in general. Next, respondents identified election results (70%, n=24), newspaper editorials (68%, n=23), followed by friends (63%, n=22), talk radio callers (58%, n=19), and letters to the editor (56%, n=19) as being generally good measures of public opinion. Fewer than half identified talk radio commentators (47%, n=16) as being generally important measures of public opinion.

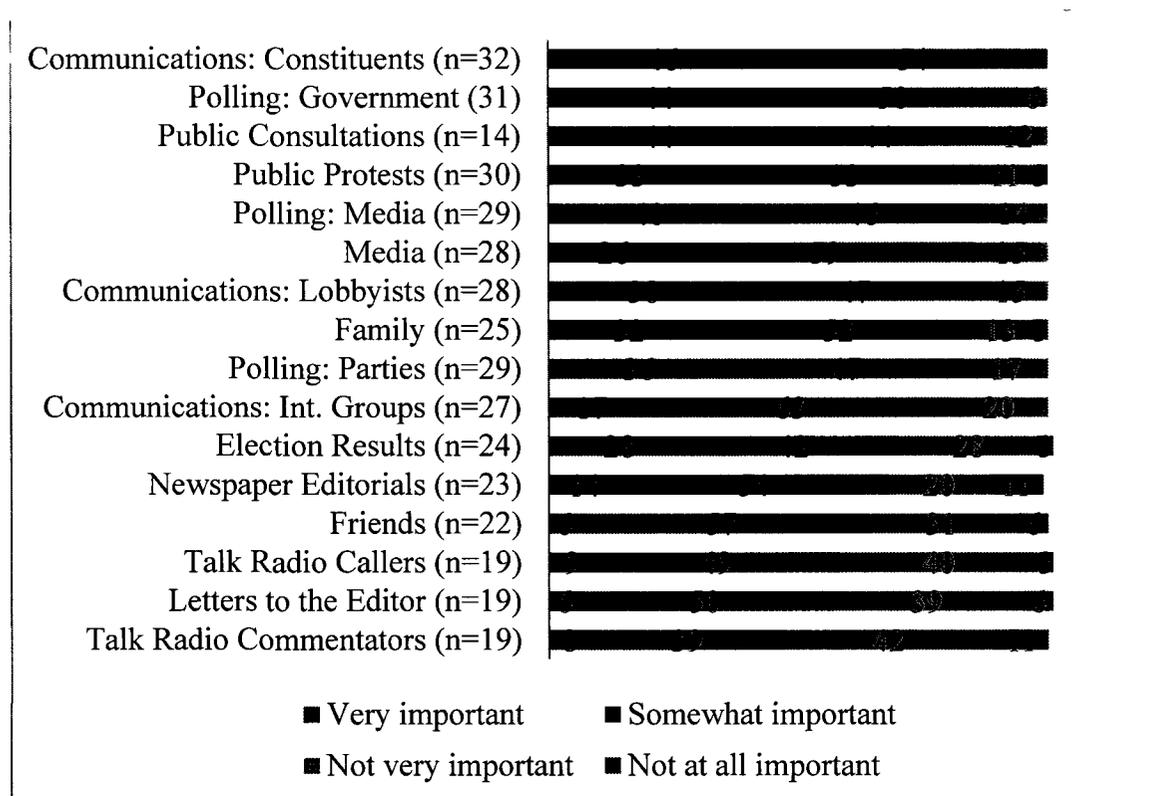


Figure 5.7: General Importance of Public Opinion Expressions (% of respondents; n=14-32)

Policy Community Membership

In order to better understand the variation among respondents on this question, chi-square testing was used to assess the relationships between respondents' assessment of the general importance of public opinion measures for decision-makers and policy community group membership. Although there was a great deal of variation among groups in the policy community when it came to assessing the general importance of various public opinion expressions, there is a statistically significant relationship only between policy community membership and talk radio commentators at the .10 level ($\chi^2=12.461$; $df=7$; $p=.086$; 88% of cells with expected count of less than 5). In fact, only four groups – public opinion researchers (100%, $n=2$), student union representatives (80%, $n=8$), ministerial assistants (50%, $n=1$), deputy ministers (50%, $n=2$) – were more likely to have designated talk radio commentators as being generally very or somewhat important, while media (33%, $n=1$), senior civil servants (30%, $n=3$), elected officials (0%, $n=0$), and university presidents (0%, $n=0$) were less likely have designated talk radio commentators as being very or somewhat important in general.

Ministerial Assistants

Both ministerial assistants ($n=2$) agreed that newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, talk radio callers, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations were very or somewhat important in general. These respondents

disagreed over the importance of talk radio commentators (50%), friends (50%), family (50%), and election results (50%).

Elected Officials

Both of the elected officials (n=2) responding to this question agreed that twelve of the sixteen indicated expressions of public opinion were generally very or somewhat important: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, friends, family, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. This should not be surprising, given the importance of the political environment for elected officials.

However, the elected officials were split on the general importance of talk radio callers (50%), lobbyists' communications (50%), and election results (50%). Both agreed, however, that talk radio commentators were not important for decision-makers.

Deputy Ministers

Deputy Ministers (n=4) agreed that seven measures of public opinion were very or somewhat important generally: family, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, and election results. Between half and three-quarters pointed to newspaper editorials (75%, n=3), polling commissioned by political parties (75%, n=3), public protests and

demonstrations (75%, n=3), talk radio callers (67%,n=2), friends (67%, n=2), lobbyists' communications (67%, n=2), public consultations (67%, n=2), and letters to the editor (50%, n=2) as being very or somewhat important, generally speaking.

Senior Civil Servants

Senior civil servants (n=10) agreed on only two expressions of public opinion as being very or somewhat important generally: communications from constituents and public protests and demonstrations. Between three-quarters and nine in ten reported that lobbyists' communications (89%, n=8), polling commissioned by the provincial government (88%, n=7), family (86%, n=6), newspaper editorials (80%, n=8), friends (80%, n=8), polling commissioned by political parties (80%, n=8), interest/advocacy group communications (80%, n=8), election results (80%, n=8), media communications (78%, n=7), and public consultations (75%, n=3) were generally very or somewhat important. Fewer than three-quarters assessed polling made public/commissioned by the media (67%, n=6), letters to the editor (50%, n=5), talk radio callers (50%, n=5), and talk radio commentators (30%, n=3) as being very or somewhat important generally.

Media

Media respondents (n=3) agreed that friends, family, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, lobbyists' communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public

consultations as being very or somewhat important generally. Two of the three noted that talk radio callers, polling made public/commissioned by the media, and election results were very or somewhat important in general.

One of the three (33%) pointed to letters to the editor and talk radio commentators as being very or somewhat important, while – interestingly enough – no media respondents said that newspaper editorials (0%, n=0) were very or somewhat important for decision-makers in general. This may reflect a general cynicism among media respondents, or it may reflect their experience with the relationship between policy and the media agenda as expressed through editorials.

Public Opinion Researchers

Public opinion researchers (n=2) agreed on many measures as being generally very or somewhat important. They agreed on newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, family, friends, communications from constituents, polling commissioned by the provincial government, polling commissioned by political parties, polling made public/commissioned by the media, media communications, interest/advocacy group communications, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations. They were split, however, on the general importance of election results, talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, and lobbyists' communications.

University Presidents

University presidents (n=3) agreed on the general importance of five expressions of public opinion: communications from constituents, polling

commissioned by the provincial government, media communications, election results, and public consultations. However, they were divided on the general importance of newspaper editorials (67%, n=2), friends (67%, n=2), family (67%, n=2), polling commissioned by political parties (67%, n=2), polling made public/commissioned by the media (67%, n=2), interest/advocacy group communications (67%, n=2), letters to the editor (33%, n=1), lobbyists' communications (33%, n=1), and public protests and demonstrations (33%, n=1). All agreed that talk radio commentators and talk radio callers were not important in general.

Student Union Representatives

Student union representatives (n=10) agreed on the general importance of four expressions of public opinion: communications from constituents, polling made public/commissioned by the media, lobbyists' communications, and public consultations. Between three-quarters and nine in ten stated that polling commissioned by the provincial government (90%, n=9), talk radio commentators (80%, n=8), family (80%, n=8), polling commissioned by political parties (80%, n=8), public protest and demonstrations (80%, n=8) were very or somewhat important in general. Fewer than three-quarters pointed to talk radio callers (60%, n=6), interest/advocacy group communications (56%, n=5), newspaper editorials (50%, n=5), letters to the editor (50%, n=5), election results (50%, n=5), and friends (30%, n=3) as being important in general.

Conclusions: General Importance of Public Opinion Expressions for Decision-Makers

Overall, there are clear differences among the policy community groups when it comes to how they assess the importance of various measures of public opinion for decision-makers in general. However, over half of the respondents agreed that almost all of the measures (15 of the 16) were important for decision-makers. Eight in ten (80%) or more agreed on ten measures as being important for decision-makers: communications from constituents (100%, n=32), polling commissioned by government (94%, n=31), public consultations (88%, n=14), polling made public by the media (86%, n=29), public protests and demonstrations (86%, n=30), lobbyists' communications (85%, n=28), media (85%, n=28), family (84%, n=25), polling commissioned by parties (83%, n=29), and interest/advocacy group communications (80%, n=27). Election results (69%, n=24), talk radio callers (56%, n=29) and newspaper editorials (54%, n=19) were less agreed upon by respondents, and only one measure – talk radio commentators – did not make the cut for respondents. Fewer than half (47%, n=16) said that talk radio commentators were an important measure for decision-makers.

While there was a great deal of agreement on some measures of public opinion being important for policy makers, it is interesting that the elected officials themselves – the policy makers – did not agree with any other group on which measures are important expressions of public opinion for decision-makers overall. Also, only one group – the public opinion researchers – said that radio call in shows (whether talk show commentators or callers) were important for decision-makers.

Impact of Public Opinion Polling Being Regularly Released to the Public

Between 1991 and 2004, Saskatchewan was one of the only provinces in Canada that regularly released quantitative public opinion research results. Given that this information must be released publicly, it seems possible that governments may not ask questions that they are unsure about – or do not want to speak publicly about. This kind of research may have less value for policy makers, since they may be limited in the type and number of questions they may want asked. I asked respondents two questions about this issue: one in the questionnaire that asked about the value of the polling results if they are released or not released, and one in the interview that asked whether or not polling results would have more impact if they were not released.

When asked whether polling results would be more or less *valuable* if they were not released publicly, the majority – 85% – of questionnaire respondents (n=11) said that the release of this public opinion research made it more valuable, rather than less valuable. Although there are no statistically significant relationship between whether public release of polling results made it more or less valuable and policy community group, there are observable differences. Ministerial assistants (100%, n=1), deputy ministers (100%, n=3), senior civil servants (100%, n=3), media (100%, n=1), and university presidents (100%, n=2) were more likely to say that releasing public opinion results made it more valuable, while elected officials (50%, n=1) and public opinion researchers (0%, n=0) were less likely to say so. Student union representatives did not answer this question. A total of 15% (n=2) of questionnaire respondents reported that they thought it made the research less valuable.

When asked whether it would have more *impact* if not released, responses from interview respondents differed slightly from those in the questionnaire. This may reflect either the wording – impact versus value – of the polling, and to whom the value or impact would accrue. Impact can imply use by opposition parties, stakeholder groups, media, and the public; while value may refer to value gained by the respondents for the work that they did – and the contribution (as they say it) to the public good. As it was, just under half – 43% (n=17) – said that polling would have more impact if it weren't released publicly, while over half (53%, n=21) said that it wouldn't have more impact. A very small proportion 1% (n=2) – reported that it would depend. An additional 31% did not know or did not specify.

There are differences among the policy community groups as well when it comes to how they assessed the impact of polling if it was not released. Responses from ministerial assistants (100%, n=5), public opinion researchers (100%, n=1), elected officials (33%, n=3) and university presidents (33%, n=1) were more likely to say that polling would have more impact if it was not released, while senior civil servants (25%, n=5), media (0%, n=0), and student union representatives (0%, n=0) were less likely to say so.

Responses from the media (100%, n=2) were the only ones to say that polling may have more impact – it depends. Student union representatives (58%, n=6) were more likely to report that polling would not have more impact if it were not released publicly, while all other groups were less likely to say so. Lastly, elected officials (67%, n=), media (50%, n=), senior civil servants (38%, n=), and university presidents (33%, n=) were more likely to say that they did not know or did not answer than student

union representatives (14%, n=), ministerial assistants (0%, n=0), and public opinion researchers (0%, n=0).

Despite the fact that about one-third of interview responses seemed clear on whether or not they thought public release would change the impact of government polling research, there was a great deal of variation in respondents' thoughts on this issue. Respondents provided twenty explanations as to why polling may not have more impact if it were not released – or even have less impact – as shown in Figure 5.8.

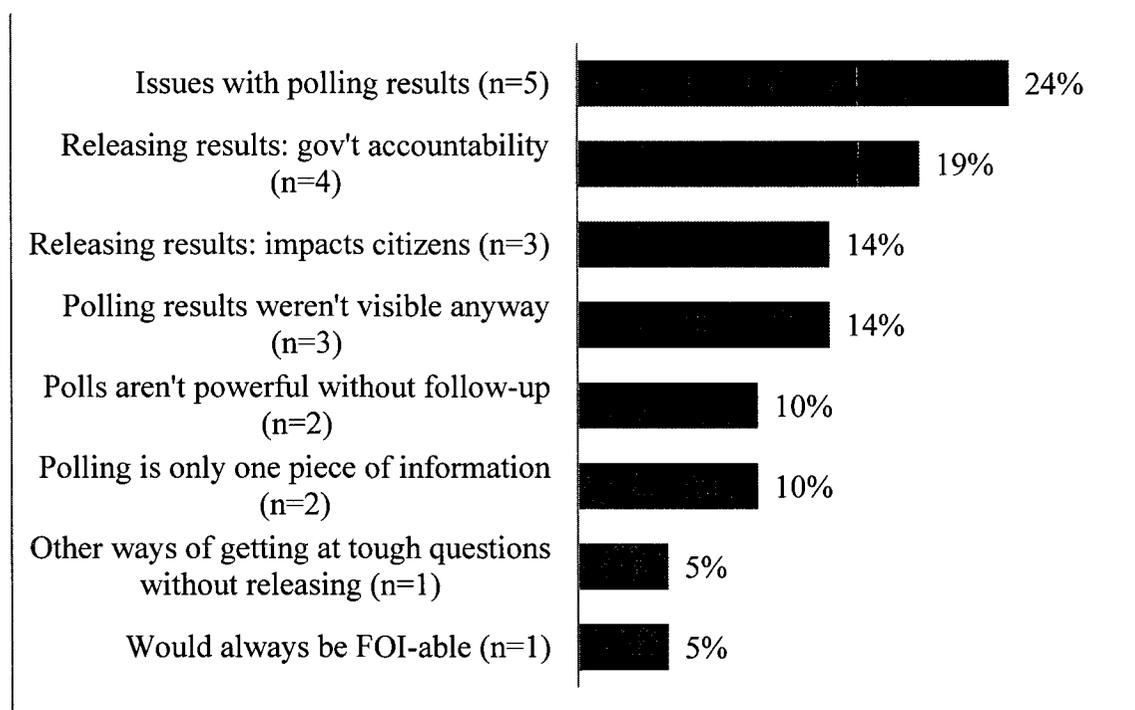


Figure 5.8: Why Polling *Would Not* Have More Impact if Not Released (% of responses; n=21)

The largest proportion (24%, n=5) of responses indicated that because there are inherent issues with polling – and with the results one achieves – that it would not make any difference whether or not it was released publicly. They argued that these inherent

problems, whether attributable to question design or sample selection, meant that polling would have limited impact whether or not it was released publicly. Another group of responses (14%, n=3) stated that polling results were not visible to the public anyway, so withholding them would make no difference to the public. Others noted that polling is only as powerful as the follow-up associated with polls (10%, n=2), and that polling is only one piece of information (10%, n=2) for decision-makers. Lastly, of those responses that indicated not publicly releasing or publicly releasing polling would not matter, one respondent pointed out that the information would always be accessible to the public under the Freedom of Information Act (5%, n=1) and one noted that policy makers will always find ways at getting at tough questions without releasing that information (5%, n=1). Focus groups (exempt from the public release policy) and having polling done by political parties are two examples of how this might happen.

However, some responses focused on how public opinion polling would have less impact if it were not released publicly, focusing both on the potential influence publicly-released polling could have on the public and on the benefits it provides for government. One-third (33%, n=7) of responses highlighted that by releasing polling results, government actually increased accountability (19%, n=4) and impacted citizens' opinions (14%, n=3). Thus, if government did not release results, it would lose this avenue to impact opinion and increase accountability.

There are differences among the policy community groups when it comes to assessing why polling would have the same or a lesser impact if it were to be held back from the public (see Table 5.1). Responses from senior civil servants are more likely to note that any public opinion research done would be subject to freedom of information

requests (17%, n=1) and to argue that there are other ways of getting at tough questions without releasing research results (17%, n=1). Some of the senior civil servants (17%, n=1) and student union representatives (17%, n=1) stated that polling is only one piece of information for decision making, so it was less likely to make a difference if it was to be held back. Student union representatives (33%, n=2) noted that polls are not tremendously powerful for decision making if they are not followed up on. Some media (25%, n=1) and student union representatives (33%, n=2) also noted that the public opinion polls government releases were not that visible anyway, so that holding them back might not even be noticed. Lastly, ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), senior civil servants (17%, n=1), media (25%, n=1), and university presidents (100%, n=2) noted that there are issues with polling results, so that holding them back would not necessarily make any difference as decision makers would be aware of those issues.

Among those who noted that polling results may have less impact if they were held back and not released, elected officials (100%, n=1), some media (25%, n=1), and student union representative (17%, n=1) responses focused on the role of public opinion results in impacting citizens. Others – ministerial assistants (50%, n=1), senior civil servants (33%, n=2), and media (25%, n=1) – pointed to the role that public opinion polling results can play in supporting government accountability.

Table 5.1: Why Would Polling Have the Same (or Lesser) Impact if Not Released? Percentage of Responses by Policy Community Group (Number of Responses)

	MAs	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	Media	Univ. Pres	SU Reps.
Would always be FOI-able			17 (1)			
Other ways of getting at tough questions without releasing			17 (1)			
Polling is only one piece of information			17 (1)			17 (1)
Polls aren't powerful without follow-up						33 (2)
Polling results weren't visible anyway				25 (1)		33 (2)
Releasing results: impacts citizens		100 (1)		25 (1)		17 (1)
Releasing results: government accountability	50 (1)		33 (2)	25 (1)		
Issues with polling results	50 (1)		17 (1)	25 (1)	100 (2)	

A second group of responses focused on the reasons why public opinion polling would have a greater impact if it did not have to be publicly released. The greatest proportion of responses (41%, n=7) focused on the government having less reaction to manage from the public and from stakeholders. The second most common response (35%, n=6) was that government could ask better questions if the polling results did not have to be released. Finally, another group of responses (24%, n=4) centred on the idea that governments would make better decisions if polling results were not released.

There are differences among the policy community groups when it comes to assessing why polling would not have a greater impact if it were to be held back from the public (see Table 5.2). Student union representatives (50%, n=1), ministerial assistants (40%, n=2), and senior civil servants (20%, n=1) said that governments make

better decisions when they can access polling information that does not have to be made public. The question then becomes *why* this is the case: perhaps because government can ask *better* questions. Four of the groups' responses focused on this ability to ask better questions: public opinion researchers (100%, n=1), elected officials (67%, n=2), senior civil servants (40%, n=2), and ministerial assistants (20%, n=1). Last, responses from five groups suggested that if public opinion polling was not publicly released, then government would have less reaction to manage from the public and from stakeholders: university presidents (100%, n=1), student union representatives (50%, n=1), ministerial assistants (40%, n=2), senior civil servants (40%, n=1), and elected officials (33%, n=1).

**Table 5.2: Why Would Polling Have More Impact if Not Released?
Percentage of Responses by Policy Community Group (Number of Responses)**

	MAs	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	PORs	Univ. Pres	SU Pres
Governments make better decisions	40 (2)		20 (2)			50 (1)
Better questions could be asked	20 (1)	67 (2)	40 (2)	100 (1)		
Less reaction to "manage" from public	40 (2)	33 (1)	40 (1)		100 (1)	50 (1)

Given the limitations of polling identified by respondents and the challenges many identified around the policy to release public opinion polling results, I asked interview respondents whether or not other forms of measurement had become more popular as a result of this particular requirement. Of the respondents (n=14), 21% (n=3) said that other forms of measurement had become more popular; 57% (n=8) said

that there were forms that had become more popular, but that polling was still relevant and important; and 21% (n=3) said that polling remained the most popular form of public opinion measurement.

When asked to specify what forms of public opinion measurement had become more popular because of the policy requiring release of quantitative public opinion research results, respondents provided a range of options (see Figure 5.11). Smaller proportions of respondents indicated that protests and demonstrations (4%, n=1), advice from officials (4%, n=1), pure research (4%, n=1), online research (4%, n=1), other forms of research that would boost representation (4%, n=1), and unspecified others (4%, n=1). A larger proportion said that Advisory councils (9%, n=2) and the Legislature/Opposition (9%, n=2) were very important alternatives to public opinion polling. Next were consultation (13%, n=3) and focus groups (13%, n=3), with an additional 13% (n=3) indicating that there were so many problems with polling – particularly around representation and sampling – that they had to look for alternatives. The largest proportion of responses – 17% (n=4) – indicated that stakeholder relationships and communications had become more popular because of the requirement to release public opinion polling results. However, it is likely that many of these have always been important – it is just when respondents are asked to compare them against the need to release public opinion polling that they seem to have become more important. And while they may have always been important, their importance may be further highlighted in the context of the automatic release of polling information.

There were some differences among the policy community groups when it came to identifying what methods of assessing public opinion had become more important (see Table 5.3). One-third of student union representatives (33%, n=1) pointed to protests and demonstrations as becoming more important. One-third of elected officials (33%, n=1) mentioned advice from Officials as being increasingly more important. Just under one in ten (8%, n=1) senior civil servants pointed to the value of pure research, which could be undertaken in a less politicized environment than the polling. Public opinion researchers (25%, n=1) mentioned online research, while student union representatives (33%, n=1) remarked that they were always looking for ways other than polling to measure public opinion.

Some of the senior civil servants (8%, n=1) and public opinion researchers (25%, n=1) specified that advisory councils had become more important – likely reflecting the time in the 1991-2004 period where they were more active in this policy area, while elected officials (33%, n=1) and other senior civil servants (8%, n=1) pointed to the value of the Legislature and of the Opposition. Consultation was mentioned by one-quarter (25%, n=3) of senior civil servants, while focus groups were mentioned by senior civil servants (17%, n=2) and by public opinion researchers (25%, n=1). While some senior civil servants (8%, n=1), public opinion researchers (25%, n=1), and all media (100%, n=2) respondents indicated that there were many issues with polling that required governments to think about other ways to assess public opinion, elected officials (33%, n=1), senior civil servants (17%, n=2), and student union representatives (33%, n=1) emphasized the increased importance of stakeholder relationships.

**Table 5.3: Other Forms of Public Opinion Measurement That Have Become More Popular, by Policy Community Group
(% of responses by group [Number of Responses])**

	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	Media	PORs	SU Reps.
Stakeholder relationships	33 (1)	17 (2)			33 (1)
Issues with polling		8 (1)	100 (2)	25 (1)	
Focus groups		17 (2)		25 (1)	
Consultation		25 (3)			
Legislature/Opposition	33 (1)	8 (1)			
Advisory Councils		8 (1)		25 (1)	
Unspecified		8 (1)			
Always looking for other ways					33 (1)
Online research				25 (1)	
Pure research		8 (1)			
Advice from Officials	33 (1)				
Protests and demonstrations					33 (1)

Note: totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Several respondents noted that no other forms of public opinion measurement (n=8) had become more popular because of the requirements to release the polling results, or that some had become more popular, but polling still remained an important part of the government's toolbox. These respondents focused primarily on the value of polling (75%, n=6). They noted that telephone polling is still the best way to measure public opinion – particularly over time. They argued that it allows for the assessment of what the general public is thinking, versus particular groups. It also allows

government to “float balloons” – which many respondents equate with government having nothing to hide by doing so. It is important to note that this might reflect certain methodological considerations of the Saskatchewan context as well: until quite recently, Saskatchewan telephone survey response rates remained quite high – and it has been possible to maintain a scientifically precise sampling frame within the southern part of the province (the most populous area). It is only quite recently that the survey world has grown to include a Saskatchewan-grown powerful and active on-line research company to provide a “threat” to the other well-established telephone-based firms.

Others pointed out that the requirement to release polling results hasn’t made other forms of research more popular, but it has ensured that people think more carefully about the research they’re doing (13%, n=1) – and that it makes people think about the costs associated with other research, like focus groups (13%, n=1).

Table 5.4: Why Other Forms of Public Opinion Measurement Have Not Become More Popular, Percentage of Responses by Policy Community Group (Number of Responses)

	Elected Officials	Sr. Civil Servants	Media	PORs
Value of Polling	100 (2)	67 (2)	67 (2)	100 (2)
Think More Carefully about Research		33 (1)		
Focus groups costly			33 (1)	

Most of the respondents indicating that other forms of public opinion measurement have not become more popular than public opinion polling focused on the

value of polling overall for decision makers (Table 5.4 above). All elected officials (100%, n=1), public opinion researchers (100%, n=1), and two-thirds of the senior civil servants (67%, n=2) and media (67%, n=2) respondents focused on the value of polling overall. A small proportion of senior civil servants (33%, n=1) indicated that this requirement has made government think more carefully about how it conducts research, but that it hasn't changed the popularity of polling. One-third of media respondents (33%, n=1) pointed out that focus groups are costly, which helps to keep polling more popular. Two media respondents (67%, n=2) also noted that the impact of polling – whether released publicly or not – may depend on the particular policy makers or on the topics presented in the polling results.

Discussion: Hypotheses and Research Questions

This chapter addressed two hypotheses related to research question one.

Research Question 1 How do political actors define public opinion? What are the most important measures for different groups of actors?

H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways.

Through the questionnaire and the interview responses, it quickly became clear that there was little consensus on how public opinion could be defined; what respondents currently considered good measures of public opinion; what had been well-used and often used expressions of public opinion when they were active in the policy community group between 1990 and 2004; and what measures respondents thought would be good for decision-makers.

When asked to define public opinion, respondents identified four areas of focus that were important for them: who or what is the public, what is opinion, what is the focus of public opinion, and how is it measured. All of these elements were vital to understanding how interview respondents situated themselves in the debate around public opinion. They also demonstrated how varied respondents in the different policy community groups were in their approaches to public opinion. These findings help to confirm the first hypothesis (H1). Because understanding public opinion often involves an understanding of the measures used to assess it, the next four survey questions on the value and utility of various measures for different groups also speak to the first hypothesis.

H2 In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups.

One of the most important findings – that goes to support the rationale for undertaking this project– is that public opinion polling conducted by government was generally considered a good measure for decision-makers by many groups, but it is not the most important or most used measure of public opinion for most policy community groups. Many groups – from elected officials to student union representatives – pointed to a variety of measures that were very important for them in their former positions in the policy community – in part because of the realities of releasing quantitative research. They pointed to the difference between the *impact* of releasing information – in terms of accountability, responsiveness, and to what releasing information meant in terms of

limiting what would be asked – and the *value* of releasing the information – in terms of accountability and responsiveness, but also in terms of what it would add to the discussion and to the government in terms of useful information.

When asked what measures were generally important for decision-makers, six of the eight groups identified polling commissioned by the provincial government, media communications, and public consultations as being generally important expressions of public opinion. Ministerial assistants (n=2), elected officials (n=2), deputy ministers (n=4), media (n=3), public opinion researchers (n=2), and university presidents (n=3) all agreed unanimously that polling commissioned by the provincial government was generally important, followed by 90% (n=9) of student union representatives and 88% (n=7) of senior civil servants. Even those who did not agree unanimously were very clear in their assessment of the importance of this kind of polling.

When asked to rate the importance of various measures of public opinion for them in their previous work in the policy community, group members pointed first to the importance of public protests and demonstrations, communications from constituents, and polling made public by the media before moving to polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of importance, it seems likely that the measures that the groups considered to be important were likely to be indicators of a shift in agenda – often requiring response from government. In particular, the first two – public protests and demonstrations and communications from constituents – can be considered active forms of public opinion expression, which may be indicators that

members of the public are particularly upset about something that may require government to take action.

When it came to importance placed on government-commissioned public opinion research, ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), elected officials (100%, n=2), deputy ministers (100%, n=4), media (100%, n=3), public opinion researchers (100%, n=2), and university presidents (100%, n=3) said that this type of public opinion research was important for them in their previous work – as one might predict, since these groups would have had some connection with what questions were asked, how they were asked, and how results were interpreted and presented.

As noted earlier, ministerial assistants (n=2) and deputy ministers (n=4) were the only two groups who unanimously agreed that they very or somewhat often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. Senior civil servants (88%, n=7), media (67%, n=2), student union representatives (67%, n=6), elected officials (50%, n=1), university presidents (33%, n=1) were less likely to agree that they consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government somewhat or very often. This may be a reflection of how often polling was done that related to the post-secondary education policy area.

Determining how often various public opinion measures were consulted showed a great deal of variation among the policy community groups – the most variation of all of the questions assessing value and utility of these measures. Just over half of the groups agreed that they often consulted newspaper editorials, polling made public by the media, and public protests and demonstrations; while just two of the groups (ministerial assistants and deputy ministers) said that they had very or somewhat often

consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of the government polling, this may be a reflection of how often polling was done during the 1991 to 2004 time period, and whether or not the polling was specific to the post-secondary education area.

Finally, when respondents were asked to assess whether or not government polling would have more impact or less impact if it were not to be publicly released, it was clear that they were split. Just under one-half (43%, n=17) said yes while over half (53%, n=21) said that it did not matter in terms of impact. A small proportion (1%, n=2) said that it depended. Many respondents noted that there were other kinds of public opinion assessment techniques being used because of the need to release polling results. But among those who said that if polling were not publicly released it would still have the same value, the emphasis was on the value of polling overall – for decision-makers in particular, but for government and for the public as a whole.

Thus, overall, the evidence shows that polling – whether conducted by government, media, or political parties – remains an important part of the ability to assess public opinion for policy community groups. But the evidence also shows – confirming the first and the second hypotheses – that there is a great deal of variation among the policy community groups when it comes to determining what is important currently, what they used to use, what was consulted often, and what is generally important for decision-makers.

Conclusions

In this chapter, exploring the differences among (and within) the policy community groups' perceptions and definitions of public opinion helped to address the first research question and the first and second hypotheses. In Chapter 6, the other research questions and hypotheses will be addressed. This will allow for a clearer understanding of the way that policy community groups use public opinion research throughout the policy cycle and to examine relationship between public opinion and public policy, through the eyes of those active in the post-secondary education policy community between 1990 and 2004.

CHAPTER 6

PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC POLICY

Introduction

It is clear from the results presented in Chapter 5 that members of different policy community groups have different definitions of public opinion, as well as different conceptions of what is valuable and what is not in terms of public opinion measures or expressions. But do these differences translate into how important or valuable public opinion may be in policy making? This chapter explores what kind of connections, if any, that policy community members would make between public opinion and public policy, and what impact public opinion may have in public policy making.

The research questions and hypotheses explored in this chapter include the following:

Research Question 2 What (if any) connections would respondents make between public opinion and public policy?

H3: There is an identified role(s) for public opinion in policy-making that differs by policy community membership.

H4: Policy community members have different conceptions of *where* in the policy cycle public opinion is important for themselves and for most other policy actors.

H5: How political actors define public opinion (in terms of measurement) is related to its role in policy-related activities.

H6: Convergence in public opinion is more likely to have an impact on political actors than opinion that doesn't overwhelmingly support one policy direction or another.

H7: Issue salience is key for public opinion's impact in policy-making.

Research Question 3 How does public opinion impact public policy formation in this particular policy area?

H8: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when it is more salient to a particular public that is less politically powerful.

H9: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when the policy trade-offs required would result in a backlash from a wider public.

Understanding where in the policy cycle policy community members think public opinion is important and what conditions around policy-making in this particular policy area matter – including public opinion – help to answer the questions around why public opinion matters sometimes and not at other times.

Importance of Public Opinion in the Policy Cycle for Respondents and for Most Policy Actors

Respondents were asked to assess the value of public opinion for both themselves and for most other policy actors in their work, based on where public opinion may be useful in the policy cycle. This distinction was made based on the

thinking that what was useful for individual respondents in their own roles in the policy community – past or present – may be different than what they think would be useful for others in the community.

The policy cycle was described as containing six main activities: raising awareness about an issue (agenda-setting), establishing the nature of the policy discussion (problem definition), gathering evidence for policy-making (policy formulation), limiting the range of options (policy formulation) - which includes the actual decision-making process, shaping communications around a policy decision (implementation), and evaluating a policy or program (evaluation). Some descriptions of a policy cycle would include a specific reference to decision-making, which this one does not. This was done with the understanding that decision-making would be part of the policy formulation phase.

In all cases, the relationships between policy community group and respondents' assessment of public opinion's importance in activities in the policy cycle were not statistically significant. However, there were apparent differences among the groups, which are important to highlight. Although respondents were provided with four categories to assess the importance of public opinion in each part of the policy process, in the vast majority of instances people drew on two categories (very and somewhat important) and in fewer instances they used three categories (adding not very important).

Raising Awareness about an Issue: Agenda-Setting

In terms of agenda-setting or raising awareness about an issue, almost all (97%, n=34) respondents indicated that public opinion was very important (46%, n=16) or somewhat important (51%, n=18) for themselves (Figure 6.1). Only one respondent (3%) stated that it was not very important. However, the distribution was slightly different when respondents were asked whether public opinion was important or not in raising awareness about an issue for most policy actors, rather than just for themselves in their work. More respondents – six in ten (60%, n=21) – said that public opinion was very important, while the rest – 40% (n=14) – said that it was somewhat important.

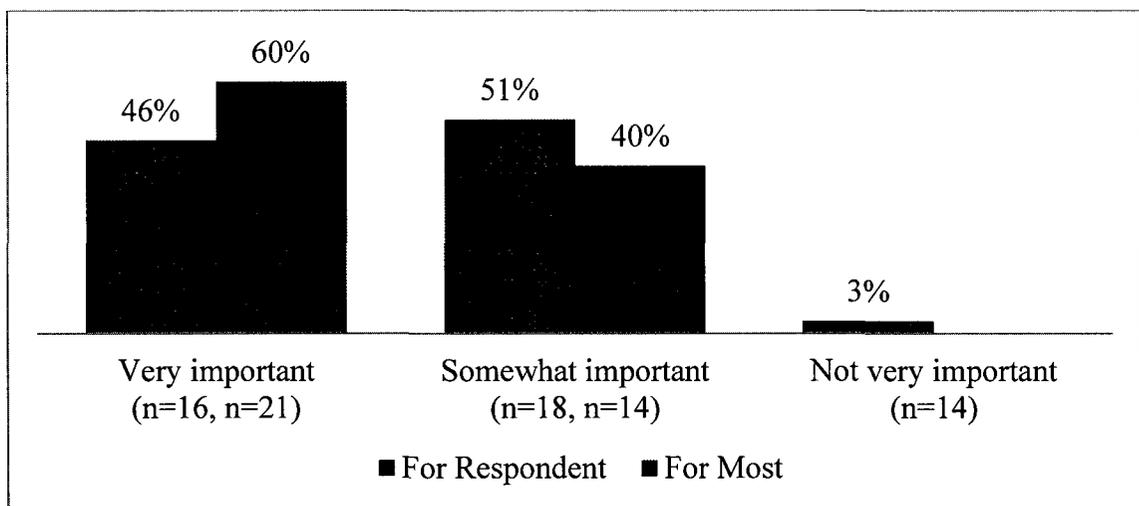


Figure 6.1. Importance of Public Opinion for Raising Awareness about an Issue for Respondents and for Most Policy Actors (% of responses; For Respondent n=48; For Most n=35)

Establishing the Nature of the Policy Discussion

Just over three-quarters (78%, n=27) indicated that public opinion was very (29%, n=10) or somewhat (49%, n=17) important for establishing the nature of the

policy discussion, as shown in Figure 6.2. Nearly one-quarter (23%, n=8) responded that public opinion was not very important for establishing the nature of the policy discussion. The numbers were only very slightly different when respondents were asked about whether public opinion was important for most policy actors when establishing the nature of the policy discussion. Just over one-quarter (26%, n=9) said that public opinion was very important, while nearly half (49%, n=17) said that it was somewhat important. Fewer than one-quarter of respondents (23%, n=8) said that public opinion was not very important for most – the same percentage as those who said it was not very important for them – and 3% (n=1) said that public opinion was not at all important for most in establishing the nature of the policy discussion.

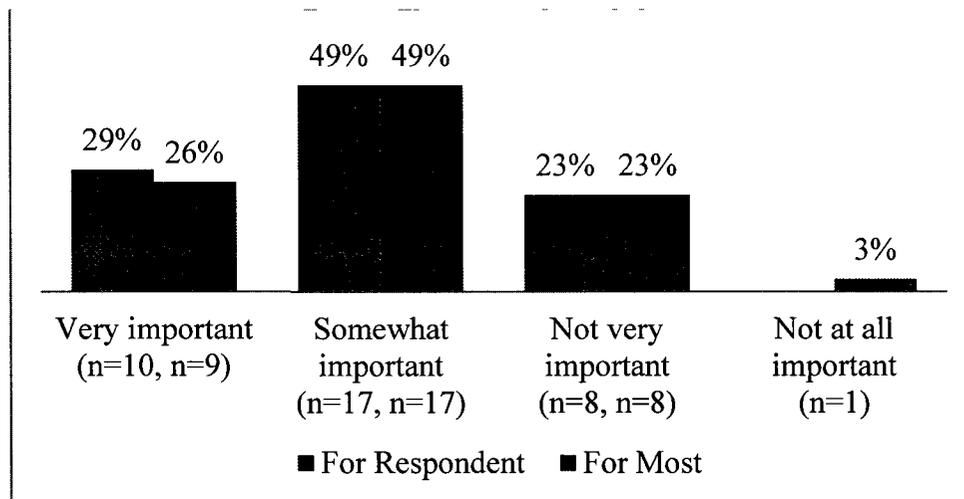


Figure 6.2: Importance of Public Opinion in Establishing the Nature of the Policy Discussion for Most Policy Actors by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents; For Respondent n=35; For Most n=35)

Gathering Evidence for Policy-Making

When asked about gathering evidence for policy-making, nearly two-thirds (66%, n=24) assessed public opinion as being very (29%, n=11) or somewhat (37%,

n=13) important (Figure 6.3). About one-third (34%, n=12) responded that public opinion was not very important in the process of gathering evidence to support policy-making. When asked how important public opinion was for most policy actors, roughly the same percentage of respondents said that it was very important (31%, n=11) as those who said that it was very important for themselves. A greater percentage – nearly half (49%, n=17) said that it was somewhat important for most, while a smaller percentage (20%, n=7) said that it was not very important for most policy actors.

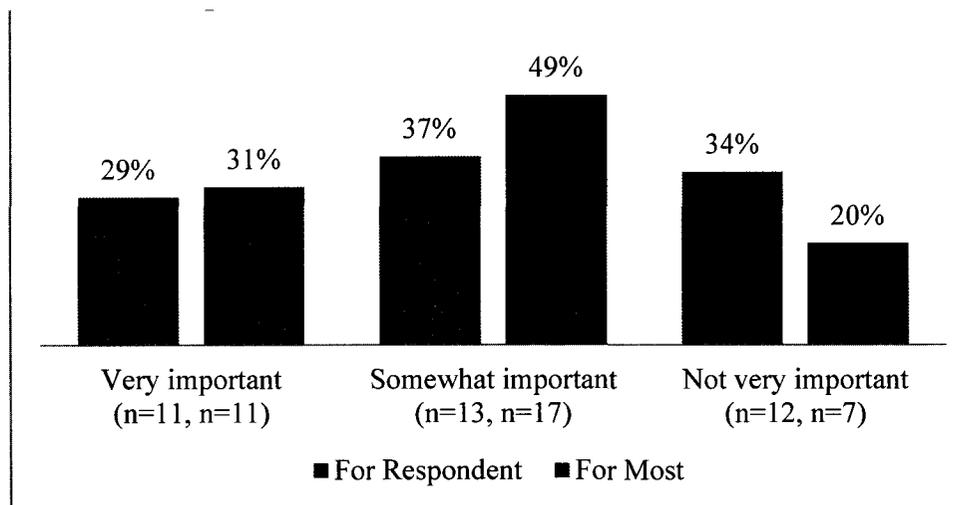


Figure 6.3. Importance of Public Opinion for Gathering Evidence for Policy-Making for Respondents and for Most Policy Actors (% of responses; For Respondent n=36; For Most n=35)

Limiting the Range of Options Considered for Policy-Making

Nearly nine in ten (88%, n=31) respondents said that public opinion had a very (31%, n=11) or somewhat (57%, n=20) important role to play in limiting the range of options considered for policy-making, as shown in Figure 6.4. Just over one in ten (11%, n=4) responded that public opinion did not have a very important role to play in

narrowing the scope of options available to decision-makers. A greater percentage of respondents (40%, n=14) said that public opinion was very important for limiting the range of options considered in policy-making for most policy actors, while slightly fewer said that it was somewhat important (51%, n=18). Slightly fewer (9%, n=3) again said that public opinion was not very important for limiting the range of options considered in policy-making for most policy actors, as opposed to those who said that it was not very important for themselves in their work.

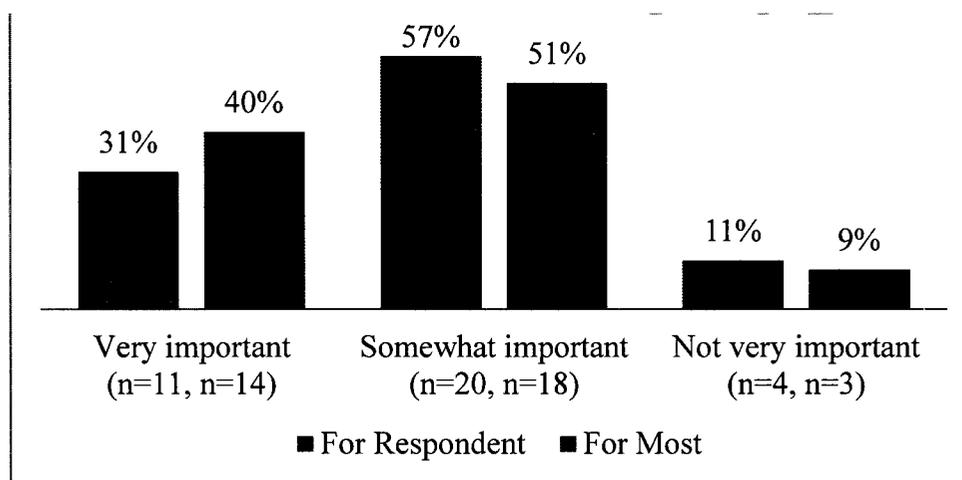


Figure 6.4. Importance of Public Opinion for Limiting the Range of Options Considered for Policy-Making for Respondents and for Most Policy Actors (% of responses; For Respondent n=35; For Most n=35)

Shaping Communications around a Policy Decision

In terms of shaping communications around a policy decision, eight in ten (80%, n=28) noted that public opinion played a very (31%, n=11) or somewhat (49%, n=17) important role for most policy actors. Two in ten (20%, n=7) responded that public opinion was not very important for shaping communications, as seen in Figure 6.5. When assessing the importance of public opinion in shaping communications

around a policy decision for most policy actors, 38% (n=13) of respondents said that it was very important, while 47% (n=16) said that it was somewhat important – slightly different percentages than those who assessed the importance of public opinion for themselves as being either very important or not very important in this area. About one in six (15%, n=5) said that public opinion was not very important for most policy actors when shaping communications around policy decisions.

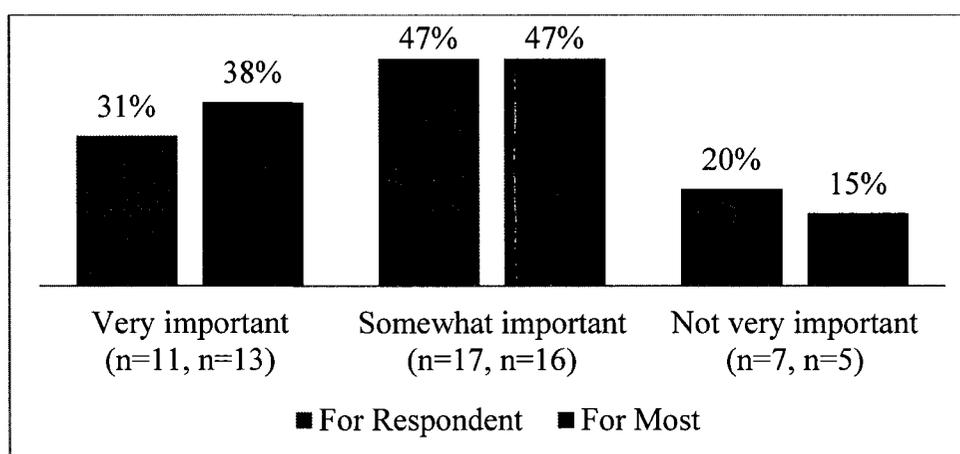


Figure 6.5. Importance of Public Opinion for Shaping Communications around a Policy Decision for Respondents and for Most Policy Actors (% of responses; For Respondent n=35; For Most n=34)

Evaluating a Policy or Program

Respondents' assessment of the role public opinion might play in evaluating a policy or program seemed less certain than their assessments of activity in the previous stages of the policy cycle. Of the thirty-seven questionnaire respondents, only fifteen provided an answer to this question (see Figure 6.6). But those that did respond to the question seemed certain of the importance public opinion would play in evaluation. Of the fifteen respondents, 87% (n=13) reported that public opinion was very (40%, n=6)

or somewhat (47%, n=7) important for evaluation. Over one in ten (13%, n=2) responded that public opinion was not very important for evaluation of resulting policies or programs.

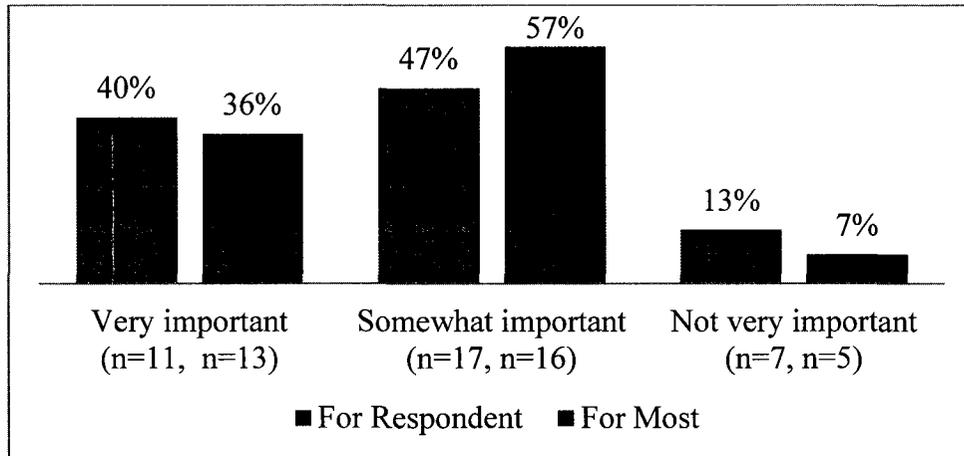


Figure 6.6. Importance of Public Opinion for Evaluating a Policy or Program for Respondents and for Most Policy Actors (% of responses; For Respondent n=35; For Most n=34)

Among those who responded to this question, 36% (n=5) said that public opinion was very important for evaluating a policy or program for most policy actors, while 57% (n=8) said that it was somewhat important – a greater percentage of respondents than those who said that public opinion was important for them in their work. Just under one in ten (7%, n=1) said that public opinion was not very important for most policy actors in evaluating a policy or program.

Overall, respondents were most likely to assess public opinion as having a very or somewhat important role to play in raising awareness about an issue (agenda-setting), establishing the nature of the discussion (problem definition), limiting the range of options (policy formulation), gathering evidence (policy formulation), shaping

communications around decisions (implementation), followed by evaluating resulting programs or policies (evaluation).⁶⁰

Policy Community Membership

There are differences among policy community members when assessing the importance of public opinion in various activities throughout the policy cycle, both for themselves in their previous work and for most policy actors. Based on the percentage of respondents saying that an activity was very important, followed by a rating of somewhat important, it is possible to assess which groups rated public opinion as more important in certain policy-related activities, as shown in Tables 6.1a and 6.1b.

⁶⁰ Three respondents also answered the question around the value of public opinion for another point in the policy-making process. However, the responses that they provided (dropping/modifying a planned initiative, testing alternatives, and testing communications) were covered by the categories evaluation, limiting the range of options, and shaping communications.

Table 6.1a: Importance of Public Opinion in Various Activities in the Policy Cycle, by Policy Community Membership: Ministerial Assistants, Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Senior Civil Servants (% of responses)

Activity	For Whom	Level	Ministerial Assistants	Elected Officials	Deputy Ministers	Senior Civil Servants	
Raising awareness	For them	VI		100	75	40	
		SI	100		25	60	
		NVI					
	For most	VI		100	75	50	
		SI	100		25	50	
Establishing content of discussion	For them	VI	50	50	50	10	
		SI	50	50	50	70	
		NVI				20	
	For most	VI			50	25	20
		SI	100	50	75	60	
		NVI					
		NAI					
Gathering evidence	For them	VI			50	20	
		SI	50	50	50	40	
		NVI	50	50		40	
	For most	VI			50	10	
		SI	100	50	50	50	
		NVI		50		40	
Limiting range of options	For them	VI				40	
		SI	100	100	75	60	
		NVI			25		
	For most	VI	50		25	40	
		SI	50	50	75	60	
		NVI		50			
Shaping communications	For them	VI	100	50	25	30	
		SI		50	75	60	
		NVI				10	
	For most	VI	100	50	25	40	
		SI		50	75	40	
		NVI				20	
Evaluating policy or program	For them	VI	50	100	33	50	
		SI	50		67	25	
		NVI				25	
	For most	VI		100	33	33	
		SI	100		67	33	
		NVI				33	

Table 6.1b: Importance of Public Opinion in Various Activities in the Policy Cycle, by Policy Community Membership: Media, Public Opinion Researchers, University Presidents, Student Union Representatives (% of responses)

Activity	For Whom	Level	Media	Public Opinion Researchers	University Presidents	Student Union Reprs.
Raising awareness	For them	VI	67	50	67	22
		SI	33		33	78
		NVI		50		
	For most	VI	100	50	67	56
		SI		50	33	44
Establishing content of discussion	For them	VI	33	50	67	44
		SI		50		22
		NVI	67		33	33
	For most	VI		50	33	33
		SI	33		33	33
		NVI	67	50	33	22
		NAI				11
Gathering evidence	For them	VI	33	50	33	33
		SI		50		44
		NVI	67		67	22
	For most	VI	67	50	33	44
		SI	33	50	33	44
		NVI			33	11
Limiting range of options	For them	VI		50	33	56
		SI	33	50	33	44
		NVI	67		33	
	For most	VI	67		33	56
		SI		100	33	44
NVI	33		33			
Shaping communications	For them	VI		50	33	22
		SI		50	33	56
		NVI	100		33	22
	For most	VI		50	33	33
		SI	50	50	33	56
		NVI	50		33	11
Evaluating policy or program	For them	VI				
		SI		100	100	
		NVI	100			
	For most	VI	100			
		SI		100	100	
NVI						

As seen in Table 6.2, ministerial assistants said that public opinion in shaping communications was most important for them in their work, followed by establishing the content of discussion and evaluating a policy or program, limiting the range of options and raising awareness, and finally by gathering evidence. Elected officials pointed first to the importance of public opinion in raising awareness and evaluating a policy or program for them in their work as elected officials, followed by establishing the content of discussion and shaping communications, limiting the range of options, then for gathering evidence.

Table 6.2: Importance of Public Opinion in Various Activities in the Policy Cycle, in order of percentage mention: Ministerial Assistants and Elected Officials

Policy Community Group	Public opinion important for them	Public opinion important for most
Ministerial Assistants	Shaping communications (1)	Shaping communications (1)
	Establishing content of discussion (2)	Limiting range of options (2)
	Evaluating a policy or program (2)	Gathering evidence (3)
	Limiting range of options (4)	Establishing content of discussion (3)
	Raising awareness (4)	Raising awareness (3)
	Gathering evidence (6)	Evaluating a policy or program (3)
Elected Officials	Raising awareness (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Evaluating a policy or program (1)	Evaluating a policy or program (1)
	Establishing content of discussion (3)	Establishing content of discussion (3)
	Shaping communications (3)	Shaping communications (3)
	Limiting range of options (5)	Limiting range of options (5)
	Gathering evidence (6)	Gathering evidence (5)

Ministerial assistants said that public opinion would be important for all six activities, but that its importance would be different for them than it was for most policy actors. For most policy actors, ministerial assistants said that public opinion would be most important for shaping communications (as it was for them), followed by limiting the range of options, gathering evidence, establishing the content of discussion, raising awareness, and evaluating a policy or program. Elected officials were one of only two groups – the other being university presidents – to say that public opinion was as important in the same ways for other policy actors as it was for them. They had the policy activities in the same order for most actors as they did for themselves.

Table 6.3 provides the information for deputy ministers and senior civil servants. Deputy ministers point first to the importance of public opinion for raising awareness, followed by establishing the content of discussion and gathering evidence. Next they point to evaluating a program or policy, followed by shaping communications and limiting the range of options. Senior civil servants are different again in terms of how they rate the importance of public opinion in the various activities of the policy cycle, beginning with evaluating a program or policy as their first, raising awareness and limiting the range of options as their second, shaping communications, gathering evidence, and establishing the content of discussion.

Table 6.3: Importance of Public Opinion in Various Activities in the Policy Cycle, in order of percentage mention: Deputy Ministers and Senior Civil Servants

Policy Community Group	Public opinion important for them	Public opinion important for most
Deputy Ministers	Raising awareness (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Gathering evidence (2)	Gathering evidence (2)
	Establishing content of discussion (2)	Evaluating a policy or program (3)
	Evaluating a policy or program (4)	Shaping communications (4)
	Shaping communications (5)	Establishing content of discussion (4)
	Limiting range of options (6)	Limiting range of options (4)
Senior Civil Servants	Evaluating a policy or program (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Limiting range of options (2)	Limiting range of options (2)
	Raising awareness (2)	Shaping communications (3)
	Shaping communications (4)	Evaluating a policy or program (4)
	Gathering evidence (5)	Establishing content of discussion (5)
	Establishing content of discussion (6)	Gathering evidence (6)

Deputy ministers said that public opinion would be as important for other policy actors as it was for themselves in terms of raising awareness and gathering evidence. They said that it would next be important for most policy actors in evaluating a policy or program, shaping communications, establishing the content of discussion, and limiting the range of options: stating that it would be equally important for most policy actors in the last three activities. Senior civil servants thought that their use of public opinion in policy-related activities was different than in the activities of most policy actors. When asked about the importance of public opinion for most policy actors, they said that it would be most important for raising awareness, limiting the range of

options, shaping communications, evaluating a policy or program, establishing the content of discussion, and gathering evidence – almost a completely different order than they had reported for themselves.

Information professionals – the media and public opinion researchers – provided different assessments again of where public opinion would be more important for them in terms of policy-related activities. Media respondents pointed first to the importance of public opinion for raising awareness, as shown in Table 6.4 Next they went to public opinion for establishing the content of discussion and gathering evidence, followed by limiting the range of options, ending with shaping communications and evaluating a policy or program. Public opinion researchers said that public opinion was very or somewhat important for almost all of these activities, and began with establishing the content of discussion, gathering evidence, limiting the range of options, and shaping communications. Next was raising awareness, followed by evaluating a policy or program.

Table 6.4: Importance of Public Opinion in Various Activities in the Policy Cycle, in order of percentage mention: Media and Public Opinion Researchers

Policy Community Group	Public opinion important for them	Public opinion important for most
Media	Raising awareness (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Establishing content of discussion (2)	Evaluating a policy or program (1)
	Gathering evidence (2)	Gathering evidence (3)
	Limiting range of options (4)	Limiting range of options (3)
	Evaluating a policy or program (5)	Establishing content of discussion (5)
	Shaping communications (5)	Shaping communications (6)
Public Opinion Researchers	Establishing content of discussion (1)	Establishing content of discussion (1)
	Gathering evidence (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Shaping communications (1)	Gathering evidence (1)
	Limiting range of options (1)	Shaping communications (1)
	Raising awareness (5)	Limiting range of options (5)
	Evaluating a policy or program (6)	Evaluating a policy or program (5)

There were some similarities between how important media respondents thought public opinion was for them in various activities in the policy cycle and how important they thought it would be for most policy actors. For most, they said that public opinion would be important in raising awareness, evaluating a policy or program, gathering evidence, limiting the range of options, establishing the content of discussion, and shaping communications. For public opinion researchers, they agreed that public opinion would be most important for establishing the content of the discussion, raising awareness, gathering evidence, and shaping communications for most policy actors: the first three are the same top three they identified for themselves.

Next they pointed to the importance of public opinion for most policy actors in limiting the range of options and evaluating a policy or program.

As shown in Table 6.5, university presidents pointed first to the role of public opinion in raising awareness and establishing the content of discussion, followed by limiting the range of options and shaping communications. Next they pointed to the importance of public opinion in gathering evidence, followed by evaluating a policy or program. Student union representatives went first to the role of public opinion in limiting the range of options, followed by establishing the content of discussion, gathering evidence, and finally to raising awareness and shaping communications. No student union representatives chose to assess the importance of public opinion in evaluation.

University presidents were the second of two groups – the other being elected officials – to say that public opinion was as important in almost the same ways for other policy actors as it was for them. They said that most policy actors would find public opinion important in raising awareness, establishing the content of discussion, limiting the range of options, shaping communications, gathering evidence, and evaluating a policy or program. Student union representatives had a completely different order, with the exception of the least important activity when it came to public opinion. They said that public opinion would be most important for most policy actors in raising awareness, limiting the range of options, gathering evidence, establishing the content of the discussion, and shaping communications.

Table 6.5: Importance of Public Opinion in Various Activities in the Policy Cycle, in order of percentage mention: University Presidents and Student Union Representatives

Policy Community Group	Public opinion important for them	Public opinion important for most
University Presidents	Raising awareness (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Establishing content of discussion (1)	Establishing content of discussion (2)
	Limiting range of options (3)	Limiting range of options (2)
	Shaping communications (3)	Shaping communications (2)
	Gathering evidence (5)	Gathering evidence (2)
	Evaluating a policy or program (6)	Evaluating a policy or program (6)
Student Union Representatives	Limiting range of options (1)	Raising awareness (1)
	Establishing content of discussion (2)	Limiting range of options (1)
	Gathering evidence (3)	Gathering evidence (3)
	Raising awareness (4)	Establishing content of discussion (4)
	Shaping communications (4)	Shaping communications (4)
	Evaluating a policy or program (NA)	Evaluating a policy or program (NA)

The differences among the policy actors' perceptions of where public opinion matters most in the policy cycle for them are likely due in part to their roles, and also how they see themselves fitting in to the policy process. For example, media respondents pointed to the importance of public opinion for raising awareness, establishing the content of discussion, and gathering evidence – all activities that they would undertake as part of their work. Deputy ministers also pointed to the value of public opinion in these three activities – perhaps not in terms of what they would do directly, but what they would definitely need to respond to. Elected officials pointed to raising awareness and evaluating a policy or program, followed by establishing the content of the discussion and shaping communications - perhaps an indication of both

what they needed to be aware of, and where they might act to impact/shape public opinion.

It would be interesting to know which policy actors that respondents were thinking of when they made their decisions on what was considered valuable by most others. Since the university presidents and elected officials – top decision-makers in their respective organizations – said that other policy actors would find public opinion to be important for the same activities they did themselves, one might suggest that they thought others would not have different experiences or situations than they do. However, this hypothesis hinges on the ability to understand who respondents were thinking of when they answered this question, which simply is not possible.

Importance of Public Opinion in the Policy Cycle for Respondents by Various Expressions of Public Opinion

Understanding whether particular types of public opinion expression are related to the importance of public opinion in various policy cycle activities should help to demonstrate the “sometime” nature of the connection between public opinion and public policy. Questionnaire respondents were asked to assess the importance of sixteen different expressions of public opinion, both in their previous work in the policy community and currently. These responses were analysed using crosstabulations with their assessment of the value of public opinion in six different activities in the policy cycle, and the statistically significant (or nearly statistically significant) responses – at the .05 level – are reported below.

Raising Awareness about an Issue

There was a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 23.197$, $df=4$, $p=.000$) between the importance of communications from constituents and the importance of public opinion in raising awareness about an issue. Those that said public opinion was very or somewhat important for raising awareness about an issue were also more likely to say communications from constituents were very or somewhat important. There was also a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 34.950$, $df=4$, $p=.000$) between assessing the importance of public protests and demonstrations and assessing the importance of public opinion in raising awareness about an issue. Respondents who said that public opinion was very important for raising awareness about an issue were also more likely to say that public protests and demonstrations were very important, while those who said that public opinion was somewhat important for raising awareness about an issue were also more likely to say that public protests and demonstrations were somewhat important.

There was a close to statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 8.259$, $df=4$, $p=.083$) between the importance of public consultations and the importance of public opinion in raising awareness about an issue. Respondents who said that public opinion was very or somewhat important for raising awareness about an issue were also more likely to say that public consultations were very or somewhat important.

Establishing the Nature of the Discussion

There was a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 11.947$, $df=4$, $p=.018$) between the importance of government-commissioned polling and the importance of

public opinion in establishing the nature of the discussion around an issue.

Respondents who said public opinion was very or somewhat important for establishing the nature of discussion around an issue were also more likely to say that government polling was very or somewhat important.

Shaping Communications around Decisions

There was a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 14.446$, $df=6$, $p=.025$, $\alpha=.05$) between the importance of newspaper editorials and the importance of public opinion in shaping communications around policy decisions. Slightly different from the previous results, those who said public opinion was very important for shaping communications were slightly less likely to say that newspaper editorials were very important, but were more likely to say that newspaper editorials were somewhat important. There was a close to statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 8.177$, $df=4$, $p=.085$) between the importance of public consultations and the importance of public opinion in shaping communications around policy decisions. As with the other results for shaping communications, those who said public opinion was very important for shaping communications were more likely to say that public consultations were somewhat important.

Evaluating Resulting Policies or Programs

Interestingly, there was a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2= 10.343$, $df=4$, $p=.035$) between the importance of polling made public by the media and the importance of public opinion in evaluating resulting policies or programs. Respondents

who said public opinion was very important for evaluating resulting policies or programs were much more likely to say that media polling was very important. This may be linked to the reality that media coverage is used as a way to highlight problems, reflecting the media's role as watchdog/advocate (Alboim 2001).

Role Played by Public Opinion in the Post-Secondary Education Policy Decision-Making Process (I8)

When interviewees were asked what role public opinion played in the decision-making process in this particular policy area, nearly three-quarters (74%, n=14) said that it had a role while just over one-quarter (26%, n=5) said that it did not play a role (see Figure 6.7). More specifically, 32% (n=6) said that it had a major or significant role and 42% (n=8) reported that it had a role, while 21% (n=4) said that public opinion did not have much of a role in decision-making and 5% (n=1) said that it played no role at all in decision-making in this policy area. This does raise a question about whom respondents felt were decision-makers. By focusing on decision-making rather than policy-making, as I did in the questionnaire (Q8 and Q9), respondents were guided to focus more specifically on certain actors in the policy community – those with greater “power” to make decisions. This may include the university presidents and the elected officials – as noted earlier, both groups are the chief “decision-makers” in their respective organizations.

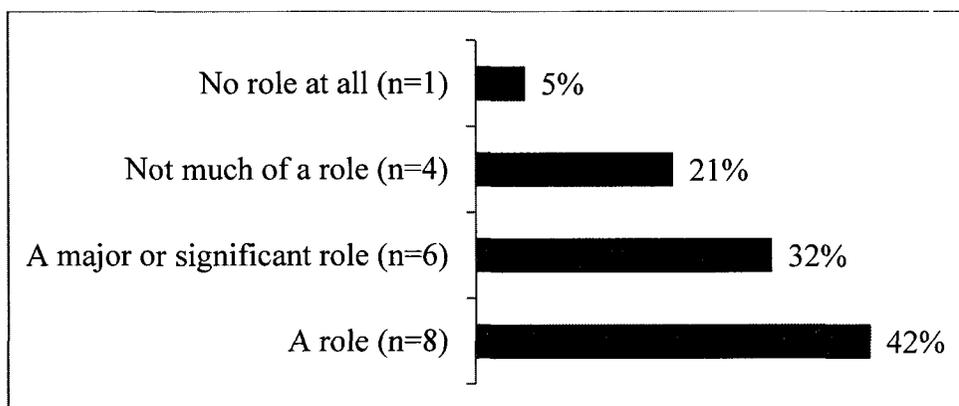


Figure 6.7: Role Played by Public Opinion in the Decision-Making Process in PSE Policy (% of responses; n=19)

Policy Community Membership

Ministerial assistants, elected officials, media representatives, public opinion researchers, university presidents, and student union representatives all addressed the question of the role played by public opinion in this policy area. Ministerial assistants (100%, n=2), university presidents (67%, n=2), and elected officials (33%, n=1) were more likely than the other groups to report that public opinion played a major or significant role in this area. Media representatives (100%, n=2), elected officials (67%, n=2), and public opinion researchers (50%, n=1) were more likely than the others to say that public opinion had a role in this area. Public opinion researchers (50%, n=1) and student union representatives (43%, n=3) were more likely than the others to report that public opinion did not have much of a role in this policy area. Finally, student union representatives (14%, n=1) were less likely than all others to mention that public opinion played no role in post-secondary education policy.

It is important to note that these responses are likely to be impacted – at least in part – by the time periods in which respondents were active. It is likely that there were

time periods – as respondents note later – when public opinion in its various expressions seemed to have more of an impact than it did at other times.

Reasons Why There Was a Role for Public Opinion

There were many reasons given for why there was a role for public opinion in this particular policy area. As respondents could provide a number of responses, the reporting in this section will be based on responses rather than on respondent numbers. The largest group of responses (19%, n=6) pointed to the influence of public opinion on policy proposals and outcomes. Another 16% (n=5) said that public opinion was an important part of decision-making, so there was definitely a role for it to play, while an additional 16% (n=5) pointed to their perception that post-secondary education was on the government's agenda – giving public opinion a role to play in decision-making.

A small group of responses (9%, n=3) said that public opinion helped to focus the discussion around policy proposals and problem definitions. Smaller groups of responses identified that public opinion is not coherent or unified (6%, n=2), making it difficult to have a very influential role in the process even though it did have a role; that post-secondary education was not on the government's agenda (6%, n=2), which meant that its role was limited; and that particular publics – rather than the general public – had more influence in the decision-making process in this area (6%, n=2).

Finally, responses pointed to a variety of reasons for why public opinion played a role: public opinion is not supportive of post-secondary education (3%, n=1); public opinion generally is supportive of post-secondary education (3%, n=1) so that governments respond; public opinion reinforced the need for stakeholders to work

together (3%, n=1) to advance their goals in this policy area; the interest public is small (3%, n=1) but informed (3%, n=1) so that they may be more influential than the general public; it was difficult to define policy problems and solutions (3%, n=1), limiting the role of public opinion in this area; and that it was hard to define the role of public opinion in this area (3%, n=1).

Policy Community Membership

Members of different policy community groups identified different combinations of factors that gave public opinion a role in the decision-making process around post-secondary education. Ministerial assistants pointed to public opinion being generally supportive of post-secondary education (25%, n=1), public opinion shaping the focus of discussion in terms of policy and problem definition, and post-secondary education being on the government's agenda (50%, n=2). Elected officials identified a greater number of reasons why public opinion had a role in decision-making, including that the interested public is small (13%, n=1) but also informed (13%, n=1), that particular publics have a greater impact (13%, n=1) in the decision-making process, that public opinion helps to shape policy and problem definition (13%, n=1), that public opinion is an important part of decision-making (25%, n=2), and that public opinion in general has an influence on policy proposals and outcomes (25%, n=2).

Media respondents pointed to particular publics having greater impact in this policy area (20%, n=1), public opinion helping to shape the focus of discussion in terms of the policy and problem definition (20%, n=1), post-secondary education being on the government's agenda (20%, n=1), and public opinion having an influence on policy

proposals and outcomes (40%, n=2). Public opinion researcher responses focused solely on public opinion being an important part of decision-making generally (100%, n=1).

University presidents suggested as many reasons as elected officials and student union representatives why public opinion has a role to play in decision-making. They pointed to it being difficult to define the role for public opinion in this area (14%, n=1), as well as saying that public opinion is generally not supportive of post-secondary education (14%, n=1), and that post-secondary education was not on the government's agenda (14%, n=1) – reflecting the public's lack of overt concern for post-secondary education. A larger group (28%, n=2) pointed to their perception that public opinion is not coherent or unified, which makes the role of particular publics more important in decision-making. One also said that post-secondary education was on the government's agenda (14%, n=1) – reflecting a time when there was concern about the policy area. Finally, another 14% (n=1) pointed to the influence of public opinion on specific policy proposals and policy outcomes.

Student union representatives identified the difficulty in defining policy problems or solutions in terms of the influence of public opinion on policy (14%, n=1), the influence of public opinion in making stakeholders work together to influence policy (14%, n=1), that post-secondary education was not on the government's agenda (14%, n=1), that post-secondary education was on the government's agenda (14%, n=1), public opinion was an important part of decision-making overall (28%, n=2), and that the influence of public opinion could be seen in policy proposals and outcomes (14%, n=1).

While there were some apparent contradictions here, when policy community members pointed to both post-secondary education being on the government's agenda and *not* on the government's agenda, these contradictions are due largely to differences in participation timelines of the participants. This may also reflect the way that participants thought about the role of public opinion, and who the public was. Many noted that this is an area of public policy where the more specialized or particular publics matter more, which may impact how they were thinking about this question.

Reasons for Why There Was *Not* a Role for Public Opinion in Decision-Making

While many said that there was a role for public opinion in decision-making around post-secondary education, others said that there was not a role for public opinion. These respondents said that public opinion was an important part of decision-making, but that it was only one part of the decision-making equation (20%, n=2). They also said that public opinion did not assist in the focus of the discussion around the policy or problem (20%, n=2), while saying that post-secondary education in many cases was simply not a public opinion issue (20%, n=2).

Smaller groups of responses pointed to public opinion being generally supportive of post-secondary education and of the decisions government made in this area (10%, n=1), particular publics having more impact than the general public (10%, n=1), the lack of coherence and unity in public opinion meant that it was less likely to have an impact than if it had been more coherent and unified (10%, n=1), and that no real policy changes – or only incremental changes – had taken place in this policy area, indicating that changes in public opinion had not had an impact (10%, n=1).

Policy Community Membership

Respondents from two policy community groups – the public opinion researchers and the student union representatives – were the only ones to report that public opinion did not have a role in decision-making around post-secondary education. Public opinion researchers pointed to their perception that public opinion was generally supportive of post-secondary education (50%, n=1) and that that public opinion did not influence the focus of discussion or policy/problem definition in this policy area (50%, n=1).

Student union representatives provide a variety of reasons why public opinion did not play a role in decision-making, including that there were no real policy changes or only incremental changes in policy (13%, n=1), that public opinion is not coherent or unified (13%, n=1), that particular publics have greater impact (13%, n=1) than the general public, that post-secondary education is just not a public opinion issue (25%, n=2), that public opinion does not impact the focus of discussion around post-secondary education (13%, n=1), and that public opinion may be an important part of decision-making (25%, n=2) but that it is only one part of the information that goes into decision-making.

Role that Should be Played by Public Opinion in Policy-Making (I12)

As well as referring to the role(s) that they saw public opinion having in policy making, eight respondents from the student union representatives, university presidents, elected officials, media, and public opinion researchers groups commented specifically on the role that they thought public opinion *should* have in policy making. Most (six

out of eight) said that public opinion definitely had an important role to play in policy making. Several referred specifically to elections, saying that if an issue was important enough that it would become part of the election discourse. Others said that it needs to be used responsibly; while still others said that it is always an important part of the decision-making process – making a contribution to the public debate around an issue.⁶¹

Two respondents said that public policy should be driven by public opinion, but that it is also government's responsibility to change public opinion when necessary: it is a reciprocal arrangement. If public opinion is not well-informed or knowledgeable, then government has a role to play in providing that needed information.

Many of the eight respondents pointed out problems or issues with public opinion that may restrict the role that it should play. Some pointed to limitations in question design, saying that polls, surveys, and consultations can be shaped to provide certain outcomes. Others noted that public opinion may be misinformed or conflict with operational principles of an organization, like a university. One noted that it can be challenging to identify what is important or significant in terms of public opinion results, and still another pointed out that it is necessary to be careful when mixing politics, policy, and public opinion – the job of a politician is to be responsive, and that has to be factored into the mix when considering what impact public opinion should have.

Gaps Between Public Opinion and Public Policy (17)

Of the twenty responses to the question why might there be gaps between public opinion and public policy in this area of policy, over one-third (35%, n=7) did not

⁶¹ This group of respondents was too small to provide analysis by policy community group.

provide a specific answer. However, 20% (n=4) said that the conflict around the type of issue, problem definition, or proposed solution would result in a gap between opinion and policy. Another 20% (n=4) pointed to the policy problem being addressed being ignored or unknown by the public, while 10% (n=2) specified a lack of communication between elected officials, stakeholders, and the public about the proposed policy. Another 10% (n=2) said that the policy was not well explained to the public and 5% (n=1) noted that public opinion was “unreasonable”, “uninformed”, or “disengaged”. Ultimately, these responses can be divided into two main approaches: first, that the problem exists within the public and second, that the problem lies within government and its approach.

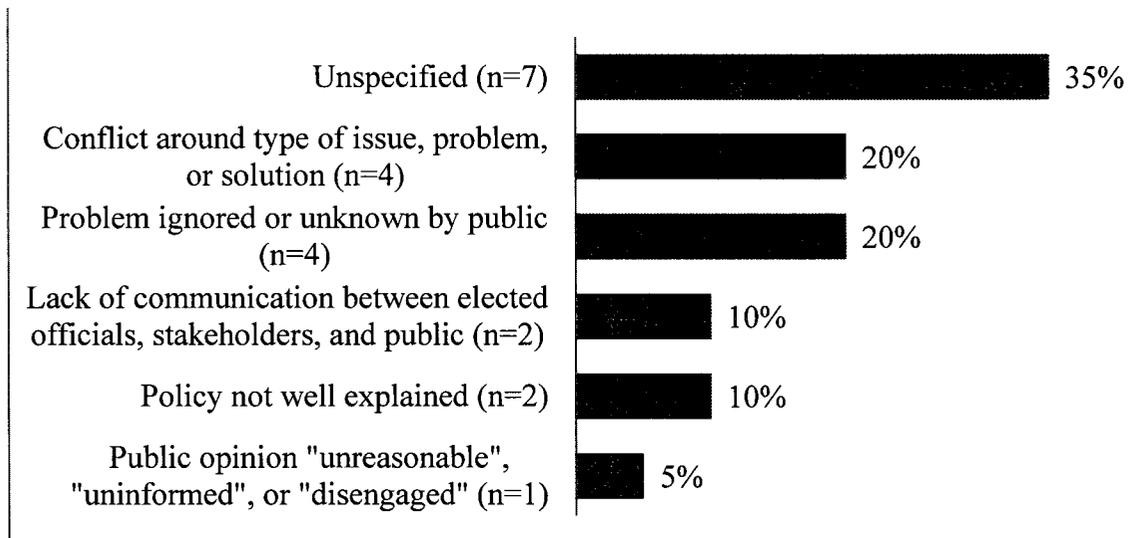


Figure 6.8: Why a Gap between Public Opinion and Public Policy (% of responses, n=20)

Policy Community Membership

There were some differences among the policy community members in terms of why they thought there were gaps between public opinion and public policy.

Ministerial assistants did not specify why they thought there were gaps (100%, n=2), nor did the majority of elected officials (67%, n=2). A small percentage of elected officials (33%, n=1) pointed to conflict around the type of issue, problem, or proposed solution as leading to a gap between opinion and policy. Media responses stated that a policy being ignored or unknown by the public (100%, n=2) led to a gap between opinion and policy. It is interesting that the media pointed to the lack of knowledge in the public – and the failure to work to increase their knowledge – as a fundamental flaw, leading to a gap between public opinion and public policy.

University presidents highlighted three possible reasons for a gap: a lack of communication between elected officials, stakeholders and the public (33%, n=1), the policy problem being ignored or unknown by the public (33%, n=1), and conflict around the type of issue, problem, or solution (33%, n=1). Student union representatives proposed a greater number of possibilities that could lead to a gap between opinion and policy: public opinion being “unreasonable”, “uninformed”, or “disengaged” (10%, n=1), proposed policy not being well explained (20%, n=2), a lack of communication between elected officials, stakeholders, and the public (10%, n=1), the problem being ignored or unknown by the public (10%, n=1), conflict around the type of issue, problem, or solution (20%, n=2), while 30% (n=3) of student union representative responses did not specify why this gap might exist.

Strategies to Address Gaps between Public Opinion and Policies

When asked what strategies they might use to address gaps between public opinion and policies or policy intentions, responses fell into four main categories as shown in Figure 6.9: communication or messaging, education, accepting the gap, and altering the policy. The largest category of responses (42%, n=13) focused on the need to communicate better or to change messaging to better reach the public. This included the need to create improved messaging about proposed policy; working with the media to raise visibility of the issue; conducting more or different research on public opinion to get a better sense of what people were thinking and what messaging might be needed to educate opinion; the holding of more meetings between decision-makers and stakeholders; development of joint messaging with other members of the policy community; and the need to provide limited messaging about the proposed policy in order to shape opinion as the policy rolled out.

The next category of responses identified the need to educate the public (32%, n=10), including the education of elite or special publics as well as education of the general public. Over one in ten pointed to either making adjustments to policy to address the gaps between opinion and policy (13%, n=4) while another group (13%, n=4) said that it was necessary to just accept that there will be a gap between opinion and policy, and that government should go ahead with policy or program changes anyway.

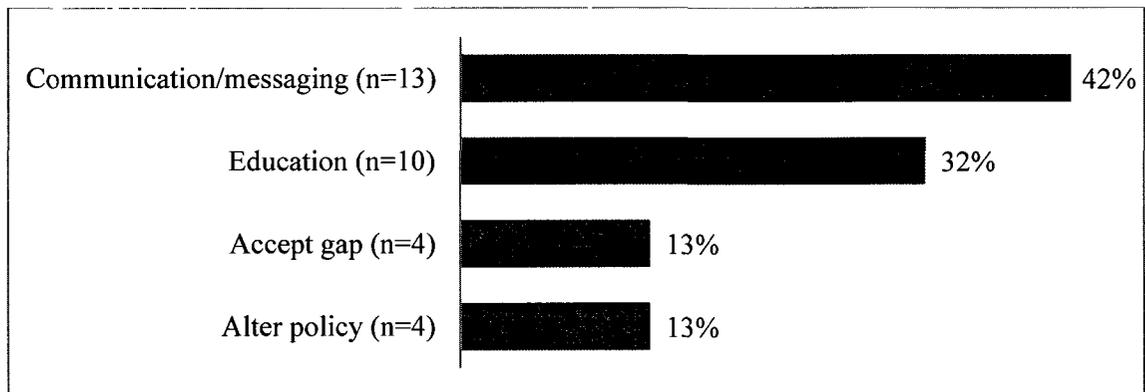


Figure 6.9: Strategies to Close Gap between Public Opinion and Public Policy (% of responses; n=31)

Policy Community Membership

Differences in how policy community members would approach a gap between public opinion and public policy are evident. Ministerial assistants focused first on communications (67%, n=2), including conducting more or different research on public opinion and the need to improve messaging about the proposed policy. The remaining 33% (n=1) of responses concerned the need to educate elite groups. Elected officials specified a diverse range of tactics, focusing first on educational techniques (51%, n=3), followed by communications (34%, n=2) including holding more meetings between decision-makers and stakeholders and conducting more or different research on public opinion, then making adjustments to public policy (17%, n=1).

Media responses focused first on the need to make adjustments to policy (67%, n=2) and then on accepting that there would be a gap between public opinion and public policy (33%, n=1). This was the highest proportion of any policy community group speaking to the perceived need to respond to public opinion by shifting government policy.

University presidents proposed a wide range of tactics, including communication (51%, n=3) that would encompass limiting the messaging about a proposed policy, improving the messaging around the proposed policy, and working with the media to raise the visibility of an issue. Next they pointed to the need for education (34%, n=2) and finally to accepting that there will be gaps between opinion and policy (17%, n=1). Student union representatives favoured the most diverse group of responses to a gap between public opinion and public policy, pointing first to the need for better communication (48%, n=6), education (32%, n=4), accepting there will be a gap between opinion and policy (16%, n=2), and making adjustments to policy (8%, n=1).

Post-Secondary Education Policy: a Unique Area when it Comes to Responsiveness?

One of the questions raised around the relationship between public opinion and public policy is whether or not the relationship varies among policy areas, and whether any relationship between public opinion and public policy is unique in any given policy area. When asked to think about whether or not the relationship between public opinion and policy in the post-secondary sector is unique, or if it faces special circumstances because of its close connection with other social policies like health, many respondents said that there were considerations around responsiveness in post-secondary education.

The largest group of respondents (24%, n=8) said that education is a second or lesser priority for public opinion – usually second to health care. Another 15% (n=5) said that it is health care spending versus all others, while 12% (n=4) said that a greater

profile is needed for post-secondary education in order for public opinion to have more of an impact on decision-makers. An additional 9% (n=3) said that the realities of public opinion's focus on health care meant that what could be done in post-secondary education was limited, while another 9% (n=3) said that there were already implicit trade-offs in policy making – not just focused on health care versus education.

A smaller percentage proposed that there were also trade-offs between the universities (6%, n=2), meaning that there were not only trade-offs at the policy area level but also within the institutions themselves. Additional funds for the University of Saskatchewan meant fewer funds available for the University of Regina. Another 6% (n=2) said that in fact any policy debate was framed in the language of trade-offs. Respondents pointed to government's strategy of playing health off against post-secondary education (3%, n=1); the need to separate post-secondary education from the health transfer in order to focus attention on post-secondary education (3%, n=1); the need to change the way that post-secondary education spending is discussed to emphasize the economic benefits of investing in the area (3%, n=1); how post-secondary education is actually a greater priority than other policy areas, like social assistance spending (3%, n=1); how the trade-off discussion is not actually an important discussion for post-secondary education (3%, n=1) since it remains a very highly funded area; and that the public does support post-secondary education (3%, n=1) as ways of thinking about government's responsiveness to public opinion on post-secondary education spending.

Policy Community Membership

Ministerial assistants pointed to education being a second or lesser priority (33%, n=1), health versus all other areas (33%, n=1), and the focus of public opinion limiting what could be done in post-secondary education (33%, n=1), as shown in Table 6.6. Elected officials pointed to five different factors: responsiveness and the focus on health care spending not necessarily a problem for post-secondary education (20%, n=1); university versus university (20%, n=1); the focus of public opinion limiting what could be done in post-secondary education (20%, n=1); health versus all the others (20%, n=1); and education as second or lesser priority (20%, n=1).

Media respondents said that post-secondary education was being a priority greater than some others (25%, n=1); the need for a greater profile for post-secondary education (25%, n=1) if there were to be stronger public support and greater responsiveness; health versus all other priority areas (25%, n=1); and education as second or lesser priority (25%, n=1) for most of the public. Public opinion researchers said that there were implicit trade-offs in decision making anyway (33%, n=1); that the focus of public opinion limited what could be done in post-secondary education (33%, n=1); and that health spending was set up against all the others (33%, n=1).

Table 6.6: Post-Secondary Education Policy as a Unique Policy Area by Policy Community Membership (% of responses [n of responses])

	MAs	Elected Officials	Media	PORs	Univ. Pres.	Student Union Reps
Public supports PSE						7% (1)
Not necessarily a problem for PSE		20% (1)				
PSE greater priority than others			25% (1)			
Changed approach: PSE as contributor to economy						7% (1)
Separate PSE from health transfer						7% (1)
Strategy to play off health versus PSE						7% (1)
Debate framed in language of trade-offs						13% (2)
University versus university		20% (1)			25% (1)	
Implicit trade-offs in decision-making				33% (1)	50% (2)	
Limited what could be done in PSE	33% (1)	20% (1)		33% (1)		
Need greater profile for PSE			25% (1)			27% (4)
Health versus all others	33% (1)	20% (1)	25% (1)	33% (1)		7% (1)
Education as a second or lesser priority	33% (1)	20% (1)	25% (1)		25% (1)	27% (4)

University presidents spoke of university being played off against university (25%, n=1); the implicit trade-offs in decision-making – in addition to the traditional health versus education dichotomy – that impact government responsiveness (50%,

n=2); and their perception that education is a second or lesser priority for the public (25%, n=1), which impacts responsiveness. Student union representatives pointed to a wide variety of reasons why public policy may not be so responsive to public opinion in this area: that the public supports post-secondary education generally (7%, n=1); the needed change in approach by stakeholders to frame post-secondary education as a contributor to the economy rather than as an individual benefit or government expense (7%, n=1); the strategy used by government to play off health versus post-secondary education (7%, n=1); the debate being framed in the language of trade-offs (13%, n=2); the need for a greater profile for post-secondary education (27%, n=4); how it seems that it is health versus all others when talking about government spending (7%, n=1); and how education is a second or lesser priority for many people (27%, n=4).

Other Factors Affecting Government Responsiveness to Public Opinion

Respondents highlighted other factors that may have an impact on whether or not, how, and when government may respond to public opinion in post-secondary education, as shown in Figure 6.10. Over one-third (35%, n=7) said that economic pressures had a dramatic impact on responsiveness. Many highlighted the reality that during the early to mid-1990s the province faced serious economic challenges which restricted its ability to spend on post-secondary education as well as on other areas of policy. Another 20% (n=4) said that post-secondary education simply was not on the government's agenda, which meant that other policy areas were given higher priority.

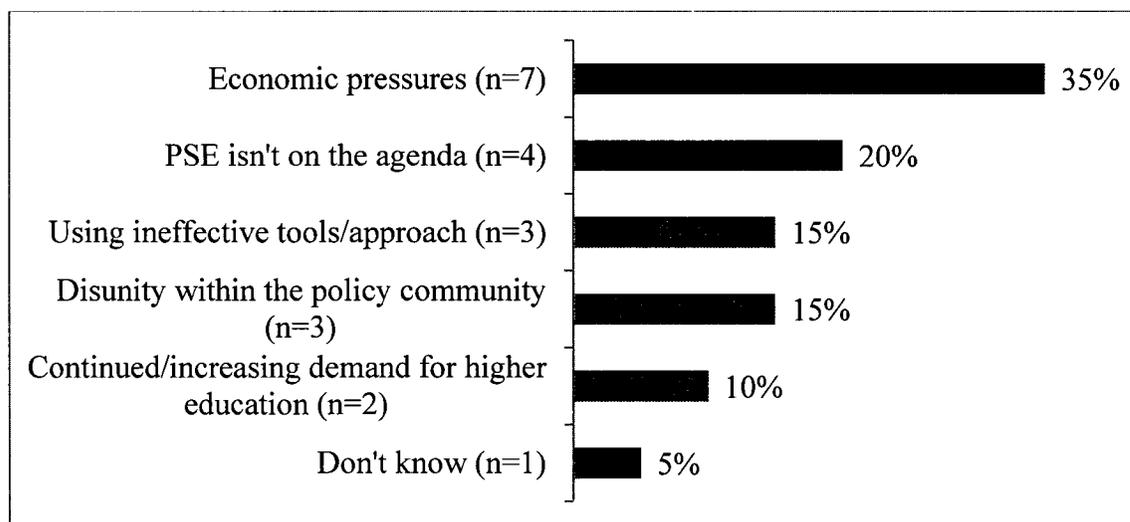


Figure 6.10: Other Factors Affecting Government Responsiveness to Public Opinion (% of responses; n=20)

An additional 15% (n=3) said that the policy community members – stakeholders in particular – were using ineffective tools and approaches to influence government, thus limiting responsiveness. Disunity within the policy community was highlighted by another 15% (n=3) of responses, arguing that if the policy community was not united, then government would not feel compelled to respond. Another 10% (n=2) said that because there was a continued and increasing demand for post-secondary education, then there was not enough public pressure on government to indicate that there was a problem with the costs associated with tuition fees and student loans. A small percentage of responses (5%, n=1) did not indicate any other factors impacting government responsiveness.

Policy Community Membership

There was some variation among policy community groups when it came to the other factors they identified that affected government responsiveness to public opinion. Elected officials specified the most other factors, including the continued and increasing demand for post-secondary education (14%, n=1); disunity within the policy community (14%, n=1); using ineffective tools or approaches (14%, n=1); post-secondary education not being on the agenda or as important as other priorities (14%, n=1); and economic pressures (43%; n=3).

Media respondents pointed to the continued and increasing demand for post-secondary education (50%, n=1) and economic pressures (50%, n=1), while university presidents were split between disunity within the policy community (33%, n=1) and economic pressures (67%; n=2). Student union representatives pointed to disunity within the policy community (33%, n=3); the use of ineffective tools or approaches (22%, n=2); post-secondary education not being on the agenda (33%, n=3); and economic pressures (11%, n=1).

Demographics and Policy-Making

Interview respondents were asked whether or not demographics impacted policy-making and responsiveness in this area. More specifically, respondents were asked about whether or not the age of most people paying tuition and borrowing through the student loan program – and the reality that many younger people do not vote – has an impact on the policy and responsiveness in this area. The question was

meant to be provocative, while providing respondents with a way to talk about the impact of demographics in this particular policy area.

As shown in Figure 6.11, over half (53%, n=10) said that demographics – and the policy “recipients” in this area – have an impact on government responsiveness. Another 32% (n=6) said that there might be an impact, while 16% (n=3) said that the traditional demographics of the policy recipients did not have an impact on whether or not government responded to public opinion.

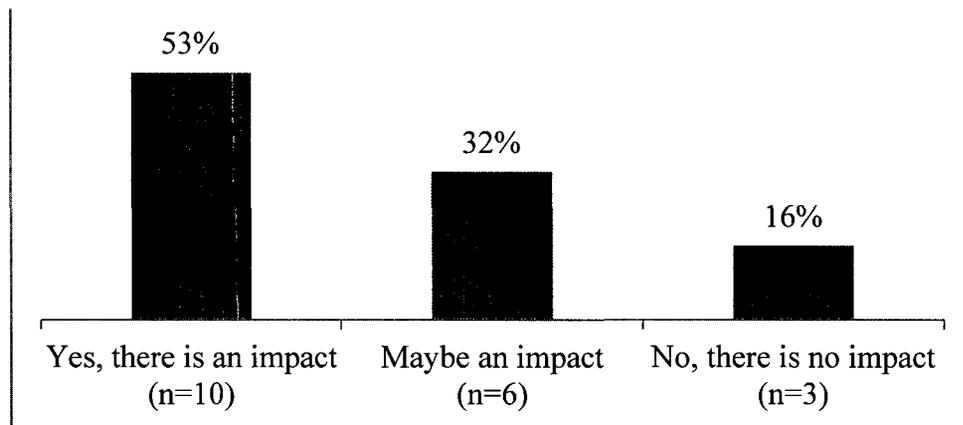


Figure 6.11: Impact of Demographics on Policy-Making (% of respondents; n=19)

Policy Community Membership

There were statistically significant differences among the policy community members ($\chi^2=31.787$; $df=15$; $p=.007$) when it came to assessing the impact of demographics on policy-making. Ministerial assistants were split between saying that demographics of the policy recipients did not have an impact (50%, n=1) and that there may be an impact (50%, n=1). Two-thirds (67%, n=2) of elected officials said that there was an impact, while one-third (33%, n=1) said that there was not.

Both of the media respondents said that there might be an impact (100%, n=2), while both of the public opinion researchers (100%, n=2) said that the demographics of the policy recipients did have an impact on responsiveness. University presidents said that there might be an impact (100%, n=3). As might be anticipated, the majority of student union representatives (86%, n=6) said that demographics of policy recipients does have an impact on responsiveness, while 14% (n=1) said that there was no impact.

Why Demographics Matter in Post-Secondary Education Policy

Most respondents said that demographics do make a difference in this policy area, in part because of the traditional focus on young people in tuition fee and student loan policy. However, their reasons for thinking that demographics matter varied. Some of their responses (17%, n=3) pointed out that other policy priorities impacting different demographics (like health care) were more important, focusing on issue salience. Others said that in fact university students impacted by these policies are not actually that traditional anymore (17%, n=3) – meaning that because of the changing demographics of students they might actually matter more. However, other responses argued that the policy discourse in general reflects the needs of boomers (17%, n=3) while others emphasized that young people tend to be disengaged (17%, n=3).

A smaller group of responses pointed out that others, like families and parents, invested in post-secondary education as well as students themselves (11%, n=2), meaning that it was not just students with a stake in this policy area. Others said that youth was an untapped demographic, which impacts at various points in the policy process (11%, n=2). A small number said that recent policy shifts, such as a tuition fee

freeze, actually have reflected students' opinions (6%, n=1) but also that youth are generally seen as unimportant in policy-making (6%, n=1).

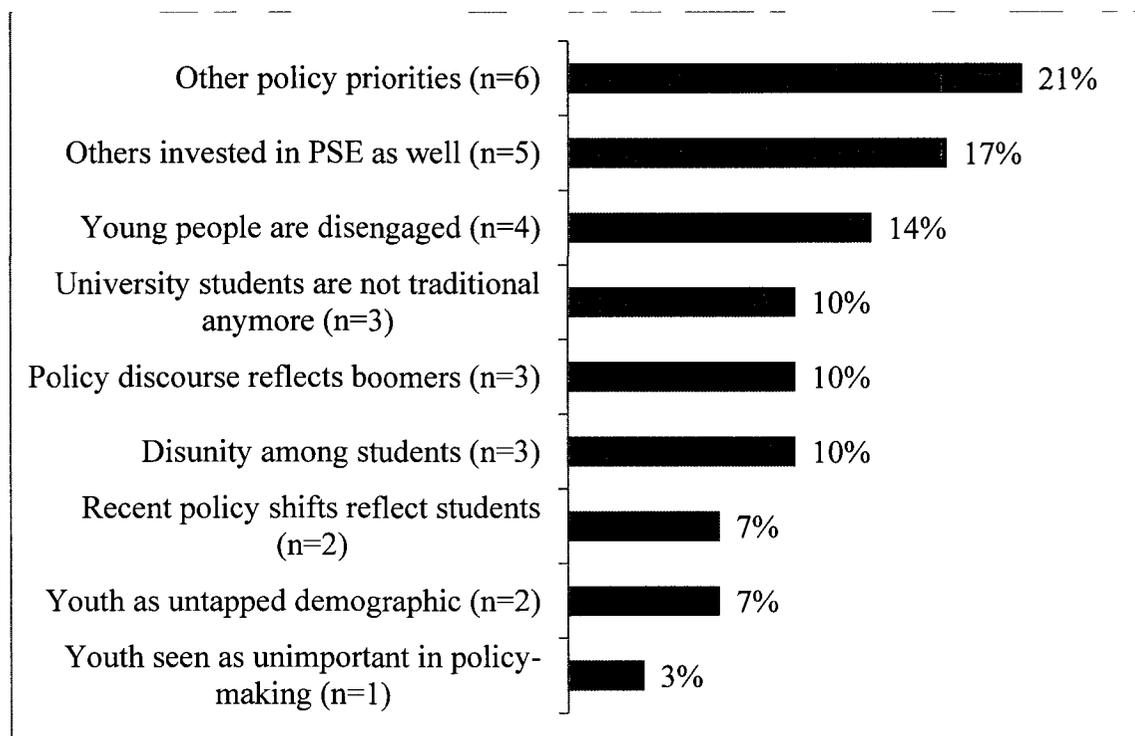


Figure 6.12: Why Demographics Matter in Post-Secondary Education Policy (% of responses; n=18)

Policy Community Membership

Elected officials said that recent policy shifts reflect students' demands (33%, n=1); the policy discourse reflects boomers (33%, n=1); and that other policy priorities (33%, n=1) identified by different demographics like boomers impact how responsive government is to student demands. Public opinion researchers pointed to the perception that others invest in post-secondary education as well as students, so that demographics matter in a different way (25%, n=1); that the policy discourse reflects boomers (25%,

n=1); and that other policy priorities (50%, n=2) are identified by different demographics with more influence.

Finally, student union representatives identified a number of different ways that demographics can matter in policy-making. They said that youth are seen as unimportant in policy-making (9%, n=1); that youth is an untapped demographic (18%, n=2); that others have invested in post-secondary education as well (9%, n=1); that young people are seen to be disengaged (27%, n=3); that the policy discourse reflects boomers (9%, n=1); and that university students are not “traditional” anymore (27%, n=3).

Why Demographics *Might* Matter in Post-Secondary Education Policy

One-third of respondents said that demographics might matter in post-secondary education policy – particularly around university tuition fee and student loan policy. These respondents' responses focused on their perceptions that others invested in post-secondary education as well as students (29%, n=2); that there was disunity among students that could lead to demographics mattering or not mattering (29%, n=2); that there are other policy priorities more important to other demographics at different times (14%, n=1); that recent policy shifts reflected students' opinions (14%, n=1); and that young people are generally understood to be disengaged from the political process (14%, n=1), meaning that they may or may not have an impact.

Policy Community Membership

Media respondents and university presidents said that demographics might matter in post-secondary education, with regard to government responsiveness. Media respondents focused on their perception that others invested in post-secondary education as well as students, so that demographics may or may not have an impact (100%, n=2). University presidents said that there was disunity among students that could affect public opinion's impact (40%, n=2); that there were other policy priorities that could affect public opinion's impact (20%, n=1); that recent policy shifts actually reflected students' opinions, which indicates that public opinion might make a difference (20%, n=1); and that young people are generally disengaged (20%, n=1) which means that their opinions might be less likely to have an impact.

Why Demographics Do Not Matter in Post-Secondary Education Policy

A small group of respondents said that demographics do not matter in post-secondary education policy and government responsiveness in this area, because of disunity among students (33%, n=1), the perception that others of different demographics invested in post-secondary education as well as just students (33%, n=1), and that other policy priorities also mattered to students (33%, n=1). Ministerial assistants pointed to others investing in post-secondary education (100%, n=1), while elected officials highlighted other policy priorities (100%, n=1). Student union representatives talked about disunity among students (100%, n=1) meaning that their demographic they represented would matter less.

Discussion

The analysis presented so far in this chapter speaks to the research questions and hypotheses around the relationship between public opinion and public policy. In this section each hypothesis will be examined in turn, in order to determine whether the evidence provided supports, refutes, or does not quite address them.

Research Question 2 How does public opinion impact public policy formation in this particular policy area: university tuition fees and student loans?

H3: There is an identified role(s) for public opinion in policy-making that differs by policy community membership.

When asked whether or not there was a role for public opinion, why that was the case, and what that role might be, the issue of who the public might be was raised by some.

Among those who said that there was a role for public opinion, a small number of elected officials and media suggested that there were particular publics that had more influence in the decision-making process around post-secondary education, making the general public – and the coherence or lack of coherence of opinion – less important.

Another small number said that stakeholders needed to work together to influence policy in this area – implying that these particular publics could be more important than the general public, if they could present a united front. A very small group of decision-makers – elected officials and university presidents – said that the interested public in this area was both small but informed, and that this group could have a greater influence than the general public.

Those who said that there was not a role for public opinion in decision-making talked about many things, but two points are important for the student union representatives and public opinion researchers making this particular argument: that post-secondary education was simply not a public opinion issue – meaning that it was not important for the public – and that public opinion was generally supportive of post-secondary education. Respondents also said that particular publics had a greater impact than the general public – reinforcing the idea that if the public was generally supportive or uninterested in post-secondary education policy, then there might be a greater role for particular or special publics that would be greater than that of the public. It seems likely that this reflects – at least in part – both how these respondents define public opinion and how they experience response to their expressed opinions, as well as the importance of issue salience.

When interviewees were asked what role public opinion played in the decision-making process in this particular policy area, nearly three-quarters said that it had a role while just over one-quarters said that it did not play a role. Ministerial assistants, university presidents, and elected officials were more likely than the other groups to report that public opinion played a major or significant role in this area, while public opinion researchers and student union representatives were more likely than the others to report that public opinion did not have much of a role in this policy area.

It is important to note that these responses are likely to be impacted – at least in part – by the time periods in which respondents were active. It is likely that there were time periods – as respondents note later – when public opinion in its various expressions seemed to have more of an impact than it did at other times.

H4: Policy community members have different conceptions of *where* in the policy cycle public opinion is important for themselves and for most other policy actors.

There were distinctive differences among the policy community members when it came to identifying which activities in the public policy cycle would most benefit from the involvement of public opinion. While activities that we might expect – like raising awareness of an issue (agenda-setting), establishing the content of discussion, and gathering evidence – were consistently in the top three activities identified by members of most policy community groups, there were some surprises. While much of the literature points to the importance of public opinion for communications purposes in government (Butler 2005; Soroka 2002; Page 2005), there was not a great deal of agreement among policy actors around the role of public opinion in shaping communications. It was key for ministerial assistants, but further down the list of activities for all other policy actors. Public opinion research as part of the evaluation function appeared near or at the bottom of the list for most policy actors, suggesting either that evaluation was not an important part of their work or that the evaluation process did not involve public opinion per se.

Another interesting finding was that university presidents and elected officials were the only two groups to say that public opinion was as important in the same ways for most *other* policy actors as it was for them. As noted earlier in the chapter, it is not possible to know which policy actors that respondents were thinking of when they made their decisions on what was considered valuable by most others. Since the university presidents and elected officials – top decision-makers in their respective

organizations – said that other policy actors would find public opinion to be important for the same activities they did themselves, one might suggest that they thought others would not have different experiences or situations than they do – or *should not* have other experiences. Further, the research shows that certain kinds of public opinion expressions can be linked to certain policy cycle activities, suggesting that actors think of particular public opinion expressions as being more important at different points in the policy cycle.

H5: How political actors define public opinion (in terms of measurement) is related to its role in policy-making.

Analysis shows that there are certain activities in the policy cycle that respondents connected more closely to certain measures of public opinion. Communications from constituents were important for raising awareness of an issue, as were public protests and demonstrations and public consultations. Respondents were more likely to say that these forms of public opinion were very or somewhat important while also saying that public opinion was very or somewhat important for raising awareness of an issue for them in their work. Government polling was connected to the importance of public opinion in establishing the nature of the discussion around particular policy areas, reflecting the opinions of respondents that government polling had a very important role in framing policy discussions.

Although the relationship between newspaper editorials – an expression of public opinion – and the importance of public opinion in shaping communications around decisions was not as close as in the previous examples, analysis shows that

respondents who rated newspaper editorials as being very or somewhat important in gauging public opinion were also more likely to say that public opinion was important in shaping communications around policy-related decisions. Analysis also showed a relationship between those who said public consultations were very or somewhat important measures of public opinion and those who said that public opinion was an important part of shaping communications: suggesting that this type of expression of public opinion was an important one in this particular policy activity. Finally, analysis shows a connection between media polling and evaluation: respondents were more likely to say that media polling was very or somewhat important who also said that public opinion was important for evaluating resulting policies or programs for them in their work.

H6: Convergence in public opinion is more likely to have an impact on decision-makers than opinion that does not overwhelmingly support one policy direction or another.

When respondents discussed whether or not there was a role for public opinion, why that was the case, and what that role might be, the issue of convergence of public opinion was raised by some. A small number of those who said there was a role for public opinion said that that role may be limited by the lack of coherence or unification of public opinion around post-secondary education. Those saying that there was not a role for public opinion in decision-making were more likely to point to the lack of coherence among policy actors or public opinion, among other factors. As shown in

Chapter 4, during the 1991 to 2004 time period, the public was generally supportive of the government's approach to post-secondary education.

When thinking about other factors that could influence government's responsiveness to public opinion, some respondents pointed to the disunity within the policy community – particularly among students, and between students and university presidents. This lack of convergence in public opinion – manifesting in competing views, public disagreements, and attempts to influence government – at various times during this time period meant that government either did not feel as pressured to be responsive or did not know whose opinions to respond *to*. A small group of respondents said that as long as there was continued demand for access to university education, the need to respond to concerns about the cost of education and access to affordable loans was simply not there.

Based on what some respondents said about convergence in public opinion, it seems that convergence in specific publics' opinions matters: primarily those opinions of educated, knowledgeable, or influential publics. Government-commissioned public opinion data presented in Chapter 4 seems to support this conclusion as well, but goes further in providing evidence for this hypothesis in showing specific areas of public opinion that seemed to have an impact on policy either through specific policy changes or through the integration of a responses to public opinion in election platforms or the creation of public consultation processes.

When respondents talked about the role that the demographics of particular publics may play in government responsiveness to public opinion, one of the things they emphasized was about the lack of convergence among policy actors around

university tuition fee and student loan policy. There were differences among students when it came to opinion, there were differences between student unions at the two universities, and there were differences between the university leadership and student unions – often all three types of differences in opinion exhibited at the same time.

H7: Issue salience is key.

Issue salience – the importance of an issue to a specific group of people, whether it is the mass public or particular groups – was anticipated to be an important explanation for why public policy may not always conform to public opinion as measured through polls in the post-secondary education sector in Saskatchewan. It runs through many of the issues discussed around public opinion and public policy.

When asked about whether or not they saw a role for public opinion to play in the post-secondary education sector during this time period, many respondents said that there was. While there were some apparent contradictions when policy community members pointed to both post-secondary education being on the government's agenda and *not* on the government's agenda, these contradictions can be linked to differences in participation timelines of the participants as well as potential differences in their understanding of who the public was. As noted earlier, many respondents said that this is an area of public policy where the more specialized or particular publics matter more: if an issue is salient for the “right” public, then it may well be that government will be more responsive than if it is salient for a less powerful public. Some respondents also pointed to the perception that public opinion was generally supportive of post-

secondary education in the province, so that there may have been no need to respond to an issue that, while important, was generally understood to be “okay”.

Respondents addressing the question of what they would do if there was a gap between public opinion and public policy referred indirectly to the problem of issue salience. They talked of the policy problem being ignored or unknown by the public; a lack of communication between stakeholders and government leading to the public’s ignorance of the area; and public opinion being unreasonable, uninformed, or disengaged – all related to the salience of the issue for the public.

Policy community members talking about the trade-offs between spending on post-secondary education and on health (as well as other areas of policy) referred specifically to the importance of issue salience, with some saying that it was necessary to frame the issues in a different way to make them resonate better with the public and with decision-makers in order to achieve policy results. Others noted that as long as post-secondary education was being considered in competition with health care spending, that post-secondary education would lose – health care was consistently the number one concern of Saskatchewan people during this timeframe. A small group also noted that there were trade-offs being made within the policy area itself – in part due to the competition between the province’s two universities. Ministerial assistants, elected officials, and senior civil servants were more likely to say that there were trade-offs to be made between post-secondary education and health, indicating that education was a secondary (at best) priority for many.

When asked about any other factors impacting government responsiveness to public opinion, many respondents pointed to the economic pressures facing the

province during the 1991 to 2004 time period – particularly during the early to mid 1990s. At least in part because of the economic pressures, post-secondary education was simply not a priority – and it was not on the government’s agenda. Issues around post-secondary education spending simply did not resonate with the public, as they were focused on other issues – like ensuring that the provincial government did not go bankrupt.

Research Question 3 How would actors account for a seeming lack of concern for public opinion in particular policy cases, where opinion clearly deviates from policy outcomes?

H8: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when it is more salient to a particular public that is less politically powerful.

This hypothesis is rooted in the assumption that students are typically seen to be young (youth), which tends to make them a less influential group in policy-making, in part because young people are less likely to be politically active and/or vote. It implies that a particular group’s opinions – or a specific public’s opinions – can be more important in policy-making than the opinions of the general public.

While respondents from three policy community groups – elected officials, public opinion researchers, and student union representatives – indicated that demographics matter in policy-making and government responsiveness, they did not agree on how demographics matter. Over half of respondents said that who the policy

recipients are matter when it comes to public policy in this area. Another third said that demographics may matter, but not in the way proposed.

Those saying that demographics matter suggested that there is a strong connection between demographics and issue salience, saying that certain policy areas – like health care – are just that much more important to more demographics (and particularly to baby boomers) than post-secondary education would be. Some said that youth tend to be more politically disengaged, but others pointed out that students are no longer just the traditional youth so may be more politically active than previously anticipated; and that students do have parents and families who have a great interest in ensuring that they have affordable access to post-secondary education.

While elected officials and public opinion researchers talk about the role of baby boomers and other policy priorities in affecting government responsiveness to public opinion, student union representatives talked about the value of young people's involvement in policy, the disengagement of students, and the changing nature of the “traditional” student in the university – all of which impact the “voice” of students in policy making.

It is important to note that respondents involved in the policy community into the 2000s spoke to the government's responsiveness to student concerns in the form of a tuition fee freeze, beginning in 2004. So while these respondents would say that demographics matter, they also suggest that when an issue is raised to the agenda by the public – or various segments of the public – government responds, whether or not the particular segment of the public is seen to be politically active or not. It might also

imply that if their opinions are in line with those of government decision-makers, then things can happen in terms of policy.

H9: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when the policy trade-offs required would result in a backlash from a wider public.

This hypothesis is based on a series of assumptions, most importantly that there are trade-offs inherent in policy-making and that the nature of post-secondary education policy versus other areas of government spending has an impact on the relationship between public opinion and policy in this area.

When identifying reasons why there might be gaps between public opinion and public policy, respondents pointed to issues around the public – that the public was ignoring a problem or that public opinion was “unreasonable”, “uninformed”, or “disengaged” – but also to problems originating within the policy community. They said that there may be conflict around how the problem is being defined or which solutions are being proposed, a lack of communication among policy community members and the public, and not explaining the policy well enough to the public.

Members of the policy community saw different reasons for why there might be a gap between opinion and policy. While many were not specific, the media said that the lack of knowledge in the public – and the failure to work to increase their knowledge – lead to a gap between public opinion and public policy. Elected officials and ministerial assistants tended to refer to the type of issue and how it was being

defined, while university presidents identified concerns in both the public and in the policy community. Student union representatives provided the greatest range of possible reasons for a gap between policy and opinion, focused both on the nature and knowledge of the public and on the activities within the policy community.

Respondents pointed to four main tactics for addressing the gap between opinion and policy: communication or messaging, education, accepting the gap, and altering the policy to better reflect public opinion. The largest group of responses pointed to communication and messaging and education, reflecting concerns about the kinds of information presented and received by the public – both the mass public and specific publics. This seems to suggest that policy community members believe that if people were more informed – whether about existing policy, problems, proposed solutions, or actions to address a problem – then opinions should shift to better reflect that knowledge. Ministerial assistants, elected officials, university presidents, and student union representatives pointed first to education and communication, while media suggested the need to both make policy changes and accept a gap.

Many respondents spoke to the issue of trade-offs when it came to post-secondary education policy – particularly around post-secondary education funding. Particularly since post-secondary education was part of a block federal transfer during much of this time period, there was a focus on the trade-offs made between spending on health and spending on post-secondary education. While a small number of people said that the public supported post-secondary education, and that post-secondary education spending was often considered a higher priority than spending on other areas like social

welfare, there was a great deal of emphasis on the “elephant in the room” that is health spending.

An additional challenge to hypotheses H8 and H9 comes from respondents’ comments on what the role of public opinion in policy making should be. When asked, many of the small group of respondents said that public opinion is important, but if it is not well-informed or knowledgeable, then government has an obligation to both educate the public and to move ahead with the “correct” policy – even if it is not in line with what public opinion would suggest. Many also pointed out some of the limitations of public opinion measurement, stating that there are times when public opinion research simply cannot provide the best information for decision-makers because of the limitations in the information.

Conclusions

In this chapter, analysis built on the differences among (and within) the policy community groups’ perceptions and definitions of public opinion allowed for a clearer understanding of the way that policy community groups use public opinion research throughout the policy cycle while examining the relationship between public opinion and public policy.

Overall, research question two asks about any connections that respondents might make between public opinion and public policy, but it is first necessary to determine that there is or is not a connection. To address the third hypothesis, the majority of respondents say yes, that there is an impact. However, they differ on what that impact looks like, including how consistent it is, when it matters more, and what

kinds of public opinion measures make them take notice of the public more so than others. It does differ by policy community membership.

The research results support the third hypothesis that policy actors have different conceptions of what kinds of expressions of public opinion are important for themselves – and for other policy actors – in policy cycle activities. The fourth and fifth hypotheses, that policy community members' conceptions of which public opinion expressions are important is related to its importance in the policy cycle and that political actors' definition of public opinion (in terms of measurement) relates to its role in policy-related activities, are supported by the conclusions that the importance of certain expressions of public opinion is linked to the importance of certain policy-related activities.

Results supporting or refuting the sixth hypothesis – that convergence in public opinion is more likely to have an impact on political actors than non-convergence – are less clear. Policy community members talked about the importance of convergence when explaining why governments may or may not respond to public opinion, but they also talk about the importance of opinion convergence in particular public groups. If opinion does not converge across important stakeholder groups, for example, then that can matter more than the opinions of the general public. The reference to activities more important than public opinion in this area – like continued demand for university places and student loan applications – also calls into question whether or not convergence is really that important. Despite these questions, however, references to the importance of opinion convergence in policy-making remain consistent throughout the questionnaire and interview responses, and the sixth hypothesis can be supported,

albeit within certain parameters. The seventh hypothesis – that issue salience is key for policy-makers – is clearly demonstrated, through responses provided by the policy community members.

Overall, research question two which asks about what connections respondents would make between public opinion and policy, can be answered by saying that respondents say that there is a role for public opinion in policy-making, defined in different ways by different groups of respondents. They have different ideas about where in the policy process public opinion was important for them in their work, but also where it would be important for most other policy community members. They link different kinds of expressions of public opinion to different points in the policy cycle. They also talk about the importance of certain elements of public opinion: convergence and force of opinion, or issue salience. These themes run through this chapter, clearly supporting the importance of the nature of public opinion – including who is expressing opinion, what they are saying, and how strongly they are saying it.

Research question three addresses the nature of the impact of public opinion on public policy formation in post-secondary education funding policy. Hypothesis eight – that decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue when it is more salient to particular publics that are less powerful – was interconnected with hypothesis nine, that decision-makers are more likely to be less responsive in areas where they face political backlash for necessary trade-offs. When talking about particular publics, respondents talked both about how perceived political power of publics is important, and how certain publics – such as baby boomers, students, university presidents – have a greater impact at various times. In terms of trade-offs, respondents were clear that

trade-offs are inherent within policy-making, and that universities – and students – are often placed against spending on health care or threatened by economic uncertainty. However, saliency is also an important part of these two conclusions: if an issue is particularly salient to a more powerful group, or if it is more salient than a competing policy area, then decision-makers are more likely to respond to it.

Respondents provided a series of possible ways that decision-makers would respond to gaps between policy and opinion, including communication and messaging, education (of the public), accepting a gap, and altering policy. The majority focused on communication and education, implying that the public needed both more information and some education in order to better provide opinions.

Overall, it is clear from the evidence presented in this chapter, that there is a connection between public opinion and public policy – at least according to the opinions of the policy community members. It is a connection that varies by policy community membership, by issue salience, public opinion expression, and the nature of public opinion itself.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This project was designed to explore four gaps in the public opinion-public policy responsiveness discussion: 1) the provincial situation, 2) the experiences and opinions of policy-makers themselves, 3) the types of policy addressed, and 4) the limited way in which public opinion has been measured. In order to do so, a series of research questions were posed and hypotheses designed for testing. By using a combination of documentary evidence, interviews and self-administered questionnaires with key informants, it has been possible to answer those questions and contribute to our understanding of public opinion, the use of public opinion research by policy actors, and the “sometime” connections (Sharp 1999) between public opinion and public policy. In some cases the answers provided through analysis are not definitive and we must deal with contradictory information – whether that information comes from documents or from various key informants who were (and are) part of the post-secondary education policy community in Saskatchewan.

Defining Public Opinion

Research Question 1 How do political actors define public opinion? What are the most important measures for different groups of actors?

H1: Political actors in different roles will define public opinion in a variety of different ways.

This research makes it clear that people in different policy community groups *do* think of public opinion in different ways. While respondents focused on defining public opinion in terms of the public, the nature of opinion, the focus of opinion, and opinion measurement; there were differences in emphasis both within and among groups. In terms of defining the public, respondents were split between defining the public as an aggregate of individual opinions and referring to individuals or specific segments of the population as being important to consider when thinking about the public. Ministerial assistants and elected officials in particular talked about the public as an aggregation of individual opinions – a common definition of the public in the literature (Glynn et al 2006). Most respondents did not provide a definition of opinion, but those who did talked about it as “opinion”, views, thoughts or assumptions – speaking perhaps to a general lack of clarity around opinion or simply to the common use of the word. However, it may also point to a more nuanced understanding of opinion than anticipated – one that identifies opinion as being more or less rooted in values and beliefs.

When speaking of the focus of public opinion, there was some variation among the small number of respondents who addressed this element of public opinion. A few spoke of public opinion about everything, as being oppositional (issue a versus issue b) or as focused on a specific political or social issue – the last consistent with Herbst (1998) and earlier thinkers like Dewey (1947). This was addressed by elected officials, senior civil servants, university presidents, and student union representatives – those who may care especially about the purpose or content of public opinion for their own use. Last, respondents talked about measurement of public opinion. As Glynn et al’s

(2006) five-part definition of public opinion notes, public opinion definitions are often conflated with how it is measured – although there are many scholars who have argued against this view (Blumer 1947; Converse 1987; Page 2006; Petry 2007).

While respondents made reference to the limitations of public opinion measurement throughout the self-administered questionnaire and the interviews, they also conflated those concerns with how they defined public opinion. Although nearly half pointed out that not one source of public opinion expression was more important than others, others indicated that opinion must be gathered, is expressed through a poll or survey, acts as a snapshot, and must be freely expressed in a variety of ways. This seems to correspond to Page's (2006) conception of active and passive opinion – the idea that opinions can be gathered passively from people via the telephone, for example, or more actively through expressions like focus groups, protests, and letters to the editor. Although many noted that some measures were not more important than others, most went on to rate which measures were more important than others. Methodology of data collection seems to be a source of criticism of public opinion, and relates too to the understanding of *whose* opinions matter. These kinds of concerns may be linked to respondents' ability to ignore or question particular sources of public opinion, as well as reflecting concerns about the privileging of one source over another. It appears to contradict what Converse (1987) has said about the public opinion polling industry homogenizing the definition of public opinion through polls, while reinforcing what Petry (2007) and Page (2006) have found about the need to access various ways of expressing public opinion. However, it may not also reflect exactly what Converse notes – that the industry itself and the expansion and prevalence of polling has and is

homogenizing our conception of public opinion – rather than the people who make use of public opinion in decision-making.

Connections Between Public Opinion and Public Policy

Research Question 2 How does public opinion impact public policy formation in this particular policy area: university tuition fees and student loans?

H2: In Saskatchewan, given that government polling must be released publicly on a regular basis, polling will be less important than other expressions of public opinion for some groups.

H3: There is an identified role(s) for public opinion in policy-making that differs by policy community membership.

H4: Policy community members have different conceptions of *where* in the policy cycle public opinion is important for themselves and for most other policy actors.

H5: How political actors define public opinion (in terms of measurement) is related to its role in policy-related activities.

H6: Convergence in public opinion is more likely to have an impact on political actors than opinion that doesn't overwhelmingly support one policy direction or another.

H7: Issue salience is key.

Saskatchewan is one of the few provinces that regularly releases quantitative public opinion data, and that consistently did so during the 1991 to 2004 period. Given that this approach to information is so unique in the Canadian context, I wanted to

explore how policy community members thought about this process and its implications for them. Of those who responded to these questions, a slight majority said that releasing it made it more valuable. However, there were differences among the groups: ministerial assistants, deputy ministers, senior civil servants, media, and university presidents were more likely than elected officials and public opinion researchers to say so. This is interesting, since it implies that elected officials – and the public opinion researchers who supported them in data collection and interpretation – would find it more valuable to withhold the information. This makes a certain amount of sense, given that elected officials are the ones who would have to deal directly with the outcomes of this information release.

However, when talking about the impact of the information, just under half of respondents said that polling would have more *impact* if it wasn't released publicly. This is an important distinction, as impact could imply use by opposition parties, stakeholder groups, media, and the public – as well as the impact it may have on elected officials and/or decision-makers such as those elected officials and perhaps university presidents. This tentative conclusion holds with the reality that ministerial assistants, elected officials, public opinion researchers, and university presidents were more likely to say that polling would have more impact if it was not released.

Those who said that it would not have any more impact if it were held back said that there were issues with polling results (the methodology issue); questions around accountability and citizen impact – how much public opinion results could really impact the general public; the visibility, interpretation, and use of polling results; and that there are other ways to get at this information through the Access to Information

process. Ministerial assistants, senior civil servants, media, and university presidents were most likely to note that there are issues with polling results, so that holding them back would not necessarily mean less impact. Ministerial assistants, senior civil servants, and media respondents were more likely to point to the importance of government being accountable to the public by releasing public opinion results, while elected officials, media respondents, and student union representatives pointed to the impact that results have on the public – that by knowing what their fellow citizens have said about government programming and policy, their opinions would be changed or reinforced.

Understanding why policy community actors thought that public opinion polling results would have a greater impact if they were not reported is a key element of this problem. The ministerial assistants, elected officials, senior civil servants, university presidents, and student union representatives who thought this way were more likely to say that there would be less reaction from the public for decision-makers/civil servants to manage, while ministerial assistants, elected officials, senior civil servants, and public opinion researchers said that better questions could be asked in polling if it were not automatically released. This is an important problem – much of the criticism of the government's polling results is focused on the content of the questions, and the reality that difficult questions around difficult policy problems were often asked and then dropped during this period of time. It seems an important paradox, that transparency and accountability undertaken in this way – by releasing research conducted with public funds – confounds the potential utility and impact of the research itself.

Respondents suggested some alternatives to government-commissioned public opinion polling, although they often reinforced that polling provided a very specific kind of information that was difficult to replicate. However, some of the alternatives proposed tied in to their perceptions of the public – and of whose opinions were important and how those opinions could be measured in a way that met government’s information needs and could help avoid the need to be transparent. Some pointed to protests and demonstrations, advice from officials, pure research, online research, advisory councils, the legislature, consultations, focus groups, and the most-indicated stakeholder relationships and communications. Elected officials, senior civil servants, and student union representatives were more likely to point to stakeholder relationships as being more important, but the other groups’ responses very much reflected the point in time in which they were active in the policy community. Those who pointed to advisory councils, for example, were active during the period in time in which there were active advisory councils. Overall, it is debatable whether or not these methods of assessing opinion were really more used than in previous administrations, but what is clear is that respondents were thinking about ways in which they could access public opinion *other* than through public opinion polling.

How policy community actors identified the role of opinion in policy making differed, but the results for this particular hypothesis (H3) were mixed. When asked what measures were generally important for decision-makers, six of the eight groups identified polling commissioned by the provincial government, media communications, and public consultations as being generally important expressions of public opinion. Despite their concerns about the value of government-sponsored polling, ministerial

assistants, elected officials, deputy ministers, media, public opinion researchers, and university presidents all agreed unanimously that polling commissioned by the provincial government was generally important, followed by slightly fewer student union representatives and senior civil servants. Even those who did not agree unanimously were very clear in their assessment of the importance of this kind of polling for policy makers generally.

No measures of public opinion gained unanimous assessment as being important in respondents' previous work. Seven of eight groups spoke to communications from constituents and public protests and demonstrations as being important in their previous work in the post-secondary education policy community, with public opinion researchers being statistically less likely than all other groups to do so. These can be considered active forms of public opinion expression, which may be indicators that members of the public are particularly upset about something that may require government to take action. Six of eight addressed the importance of polling made public/commissioned by the media and five (elected officials, ministerial assistants, deputy ministers, senior civil servants, and public opinion researchers) were unanimous in saying that polling commissioned by the government was important in their previous work. This does differ, but only slightly, from respondents' assessment of the importance of public opinion expressions generally in policy making: probably a reflection of individuals' experiences when they held particular positions, the time frame within which they operated, and the difference(s) between then and now. In particular, media identified the importance of government polling generally, while

being split on the importance of government polling when media respondents were active in the post-secondary education community.

However, assessing what measures were/are important is not enough to really gain a clear understanding of policy actors' assessments of public opinion. Actors' assessments of the importance of various expressions of public opinion were quite different from their assessments of what measures of public opinion were good and how often they consulted those measures. There were many divisions among the actors when it came to assessing good measures of public opinion: members of six of the eight groups (Ministerial Assistants, Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Senior Civil Servants, Public Opinion Researchers, and Student Union Representatives) unanimously agreed that polling commissioned by the provincial government was a good reflection of public opinion. Five groups unanimously agreed that communications from constituents (Ministerial Assistants, Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Media, and University Presidents), polling made public/commissioned by the media (Ministerial Assistants, Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Media, and Public Opinion Researchers), and public consultations (Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Media, Public Opinion Researchers, University Presidents) were a good reflection of opinion. However, half or fewer pointed to polling commissioned by political parties, newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and friends, family, and interest group communications as being good measures. Talk radio commentators, talk radio callers, election results, lobbyists' communications and public protests and demonstrations were also not really well supported by most policy group members.

Overall, there was a great deal of variation among the policy community groups in terms of how often they consulted various measures of public opinion – the most variation of all of the questions assessing value and utility of these measures. Just over half of the groups agreed amongst themselves that they often consulted newspaper editorials, polling made public by the media, and public protests and demonstrations; while just two of the groups (ministerial assistants and deputy ministers) said that they had very or somewhat often consulted polling commissioned by the provincial government. In terms of the government polling, this may be a reflection of how often polling was done during the 1991 to 2004 time period, and whether or not the polling was specific to the post-secondary education area. It may also reflect policy actors' concerns about public opinion polling, as reflected in the literature. However, it may be that there were simply other ways of assessing public opinion than polling – and that these would be more frequently available to all actors.

While six of eight groups of policy actors (Ministerial Assistants, Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Media, Public Opinion Researchers, University Presidents) pointed unanimously to government polling being an important source of public opinion for policy makers generally, five of eight groups (Ministerial Assistants, Elected Officials, Deputy Ministers, Senior Civil Servants, and Public Opinion Researchers) unanimously said that it has been important for them in their work. However, government polling was not considered one of the most important or most used measures of public opinion. This may be partly related to how often it was conducted – questions about post-secondary education, for example, were not asked every month throughout the 1991-2004 period – and what kinds of questions were

asked. Thus, even though they were concerned about the validity and reliability of government-sponsored polling, some respondents also clearly saw the value it brought to the table for policy making.

There is an assumption that how decision-makers understand public opinion should influence whether they take opinion into account when making policy (Herbst 1998; Sharp 1999). This work, and my conclusions around policy actors' differing conceptions of public opinion, its importance and value; the value of government-sponsored polling; and the role of other factors in influencing policy decisions has clear implications for democratic responsiveness theories.

When asked directly about public opinion's role for decision-makers in post-secondary education policy, three-quarters of respondents said that public opinion does matter. This is a different approach to other questions that were answered about individuals' own use of public opinion and the use of public opinion by most others. Decision-makers could be defined as elected officials, since they are the ones traditionally making policy decisions. However, in this policy area, there will be other decision-makers, including university presidents who would make decisions with their boards of governors around tuition fee increases. As it was, ministerial assistants, university presidents, and elected officials were more likely to say that public opinion played a role in decision-making. Given that two of these groups would be making decisions (supported by the third group), this is a clear indication that public opinion did matter in decision-making around tuition fee and student loan policy. Ministerial assistants, university presidents, and elected officials said that public opinion was part of the process of policy and decision-making, pointing to both process and outcomes.

They also emphasized the importance of the agenda, and public opinion's role in shaping that agenda.

Equally importantly, student union representatives and public opinion researchers said that public opinion did not matter in this policy area. For the students, this was likely a sense that their goals for policy were unachieved (particularly if they were active in the community prior to the tuition fee freeze). For the public opinion researchers, this was perhaps a reflection of how they saw public opinion research being done and being used in policy making. The two groups spoke of the lack of connection between the public and post-secondary education (salience), post-secondary education not being on the government's (or the public's) agenda, and the variations in public opinion.

Salience of the issues for the public was also determined to be important for all groups when assessing why public opinion may or may not be important in this policy area. Ministerial assistants, elected officials, and media respondents talked about post-secondary education being on the agenda. They also talked about the impact of specific publics, rather than about the mass public, on influencing this agenda. These groups were very aware of public opinion overall, and the need to respond to it in some way. University presidents and student union representatives, however, argued that post-secondary education was probably not on the public's agenda, and talked of the impact of public opinion on stakeholder groups as well as on government. They clearly felt that they were a separate public(s), and that there was a significant gap between what they thought needed to be done in this policy area and how the mass public felt. These perceptions of salience would clearly also vary over time, as both university presidents

and student union representatives who were active in the 1999-2001 period would point to a greater interest in post-secondary education among the public than previous respondents would have noted.

This work also suggests that we are missing an important piece of the public opinion-policy relationship puzzle: the definition of public opinion, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In order to truly understand the connection (or lack thereof) between policy and opinion, we must understand what forms/measures of public opinion are available to decision-makers and whose opinions are important. When we can understand that there are a myriad of measures that the policy community accesses, then the link between opinion and policy becomes at once more and less tenuous: more tenuous because we don't know how these different definitions of public opinion really matter, and less tenuous because we think that different definitions of public opinion could matter.

Current responsiveness theories also face limitations around their conception and operationalization of policy change as a result of public opinion. Some responsiveness theories suggest that decision-makers may be taking symbolic actions or may not be acting in this policy area because they don't believe that the public may be aware of or interested in the area (Sharp 1999). They may also be making changes so that "policy remains within a broad zone of indifference rather than an exact correspondence between public opinion and public policy" (Sharp 1999, 21). We may need to think of public opinion as a constraint, rather than as "a causal agent for governing outcomes" (Sharp 1999, 21).

While policy outcomes are an important way to examine the relationship between opinion and policy, it is also vital to understand how public opinion may act on (and be acted upon by) various stages in the policy cycle – the “process” referred to earlier in this chapter. By understanding how this relationship(s) may vary across policy-making processes, we come to a better understanding of what Sharp (1999) calls the "sometime" relationship between opinion and policy. This research shows that in fact different policy community groups use different expressions of public opinion for various purposes during policy making. This helps explain why there may be a disjunction between public opinion and policy: opinion may still be important to policy makers and used in decision-making, but it may have more influence at different points in the process.

These activities correspond with traditional conceptions of the policy making process, such as those proposed by Howlett and Ramesh (2006) and Pal (2005). However, there is a limitation that restricts my ability to answer this question fully: while various activities are explored as part of the policy making process, a clear decision point is not always identified. Thus, policy actors were asked about a series of activities but were not asked about how public opinion matters at the point of decision. This was not a conscious decision, but does reflect the understanding that a very small group of decision makers – rather than of policy actors – are directly involved in making policy decisions (McNutt 2006).

Policy community members overall pointed first to the importance of public opinion in raising awareness about an issue or agenda-setting, then to limiting the range of options considered, followed by evaluating a policy or program. Elected officials and

deputy ministers were slightly more likely to say that public opinion was very important in raising awareness around issues for them, perhaps speaking to the need to be politically astute regarding what issues should be on the government's agenda. Public opinion was more important in limiting the range of options considered for senior civil servants, public opinion researchers, and student union representatives. This perhaps reflects the need to be aware of what could be politically (and bureaucratically) feasible earlier in the policy cycle – both from those who would likely have to design options (senior civil servants), those who would be polling/researching those options (PORs), and those who would wish to influence that range of options (SU representatives). Public opinion was more important for elected officials, ministerial assistants, and senior civil servants when evaluating a policy or program, perhaps again linked to how each would define evaluation. Elected officials and ministerial assistants would be concerned about public reception of a program/policy, while senior civil servants may be overseeing the implementation/evaluation of a policy or program.

Just over three-quarters of all respondents pointed to the important role of public opinion in establishing the nature of the policy discussion (or problem definition) and shaping communications. University presidents, followed by ministerial assistants, elected officials, deputy ministers, and public opinion researchers were slightly more likely to point to the importance of public opinion in establishing the nature of the policy discussion (problem definition). Ministerial assistants, elected officials, and public opinion researchers were more likely to identify public opinion as being very important for shaping communications, which points to the more traditional understanding of who values communications with the public – those who are elected

and those who support the elected. Two-thirds identified gathering evidence for policy making as an activity involving public opinion. Deputy ministers and public opinion researchers were more likely than other groups of policy actors to say that public opinion was very important when gathering evidence to inform policy making. While this certainly makes sense in the context of public opinion researchers, it may reflect the “in-between” nature of the deputy minister and his/her responsibilities to the minister and to the staff in his/her department.

However, when asked about the importance of public opinion for *other* people, policy actors rated public opinion as being more important in agenda-setting, gathering evidence for policy making, limiting the range of options considered, and shaping communications than they did for themselves in their work. Only elected officials and university presidents assessed the importance of public opinion in the various phases of policy making in the same way for themselves as they did for most others: all other policy community members thought that public opinion was not as or more important than they did in different phases of the policy cycle. Senior civil servants saw others’ use of public opinion in policy making as being almost completely different than their own use.

It is also important to explore what expressions of public opinion may be more important than others at different points in the policy cycle. Analysis showed direct relationships between the importance of certain expressions of public opinion and respondents’ assessment of how important opinion was at different points in the cycle. Those who thought that communications from constituents, public protests and demonstrations, and public consultations were very important expressions of public

opinion were more likely to point to their importance in raising awareness about an issue - ministerial assistants and elected officials in particular. This is not surprising, given the sensitivity to public opinion that these groups would have. Those who thought that government polling was a very important measure of public opinion were more likely to point to opinion's role in establishing the nature of the discussion - more likely to be university presidents, ministerial assistants, elected officials, deputy ministers, and public opinion researchers.

Newspaper editorials and public consultations were expressions related to the importance of public opinion in shaping communications around policy decisions. While this implies responsiveness to newspaper editorials, it is interesting that respondents making this connection said that newspaper editorials were actually only somewhat important in assessing public opinion. This may reflect on the conflict between defining the "public" and responding to a very specific and vocal public. Those respondents rating polling made public by the media or commissioned by the media as being very important were more likely to say that public opinion was important in policy or program evaluation. This may be related to media polling/coverage that is traditionally confrontational, or highlighting problems that government may not want highlighted (Alboim 2001; Graber 2005).

The literature is clear about the role of public opinion in agenda-setting, as that is often one of the most visible connections between opinion and policy (Soroka 2002; Wlezien and Soroka 2003; Howlett and Ramesh 2006; Sharp 1999). Simply put, public opinion is important in the establishment of the government's agenda. This is demonstrated in my work as well, with most policy community members pointing to

the importance of public opinion in establishing the agenda. Some of the recent literature also points to the strong role that public opinion research has in shaping communications and messaging from government to the public(s) (Butler 2005; Page 2005). However, the conclusions of this research project are not in complete agreement with this idea: since just over three-quarters of policy actor respondents point to public opinion having an important role in shaping communications about a policy decision, it does not seem to be as important as in raising awareness about an issue (agenda-setting), limiting the range of options considered (policy formulation), or evaluating a program or policy (evaluation). This may correspond with the activities undertaken by these particular actors, or they may have defined communications about a policy decision (the question asked in this study) in a very narrow way. Communications could be as limited as constructing a press release, for example, or they may involve a much more complex strategy designed to make a potentially unpalatable decision more palatable or acceptable.

Issue salience is an important part of the discussion around the relationship between public opinion and public policy. As noted in Chapter 4, the Saskatchewan government did seem to react to pressure from the public to decrease tuition fees and increase accessibility by shifting the public discourse around the benefits of post-secondary education. As noted earlier in this chapter, the government's emphasis on the personal benefits of post-secondary education, amount and variety of available student assistance, and the "reasonable" nature of student debt levels was provided to help counter public demand for decreasing fees. By focusing on how needy students' needs were being met the government dissuaded/countered concerns about access to

post-secondary education, although this argument became more difficult to make over time.

Post-secondary education – including access, tuition fees, and student loans – was not consistently on the public’s agenda throughout the 1991 to 2004 period. Education was rarely one of the often-mentioned priorities of Saskatchewan people during this time, but there were times when the public did express concerns. For the most part, Saskatchewan people argued that the government was managing the post-secondary sector adequately, but there were periods when the public called that management into question. When tuition fees and access to post-secondary education became more of a concern for a greater number of people in the late 1990s, these concerns were reflected in the 1999 election party platforms, and the discussion that took place throughout that election. Even though issues around post-secondary education might have had different levels of salience throughout this time, government polling questions were not asked consistently throughout – making it difficult to really track salience. It is important to note, however, that it is likely that policy community members were using other sources of public opinion to track salience when polling wasn’t being undertaken.

Overall, this research shows that there is a relationship between public opinion and public policy. However, it is not clear that there is a causal, linear relationship. Policy community members identify varying uses of public opinion, and those that may be more or less important at varying times in the policy process, but this research stops short at pointing to a clear causal link. Members of Saskatchewan's post-secondary education policy community have used opinion research to understand the people(s)

agenda, shape messaging, and in performance measurement. This is generally in line with what others (like Page 2006; Petry 2007) have established: that public opinion is often used more frequently for communications and performance tracking than for actual decision-making. However, the role that public opinion can play in agenda setting cannot be underestimated (Soroka 2002), and the importance of that role seems to be reinforced in this research.

Lack of Concern for Public Opinion? Accounting for Non-Responsiveness

Research Question 3 How would actors account for a seeming lack of concern for public opinion in particular policy cases, where opinion clearly deviates from policy outcomes?

H8: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when it is more salient to a particular public that is less politically powerful.

H9: Political decision-makers are more likely to be non-responsive to an issue (or to respond in a way that differs from the direction public opinion would favour) when the policy trade-offs required would result in a backlash from a wider public.

The focus on actors was chosen in order to focus on their opinions, their preferences, and how what they valued in the policy-making process might be reflected in policy decisions (Howlett 1986; Sharkansky 1971). However, understanding the context of their actions was also vital for assessing the constraints and limits within

which policy was made. These actions and the context for these actions, laid out in the policy history, help us to understand why there may not be such a close connection between public opinion and public policy. Additionally, it is important to remember that although there are many people involved (directly or indirectly) in policy making, decision-making really comes down to elected officials. That is why it is so important to find out about the role of public opinion in varying stages in the policy cycle.

During the 1990s, Saskatchewan's policies around student loans and tuition fees were often out of balance with what the various publics wanted to see. However, respondents highlighted reasons other than the nature/expression of public opinion for this lack of convergence. For the first part of the government's term under Premier Romanow, the focus was really on fiscal restraint and preventing the province from sliding into bankruptcy. While there were cuts to the post-secondary sector which resulted in higher tuition fees and increasing student loans, the government was relatively restrained when compared to actions taken by other provinces at the time.

Additionally, the provincial government had to revisit its investments in the post-secondary sector as a result of federal government retrenchment and its reduction of fiscal transfers supporting post-secondary education. Perhaps this helps to reinforce Skogstad's (2005) assessment that the general public can have an impact on policy making through its environmental and political influences. When the public reacted to the cuts in federal fiscal transfers; interest groups like student unions, university administrations, and others including the faculty associations began to react publicly to these changes; which were reported by the media; and governments seemed to respond. It seemed to help that these opinions were largely in line with those of the elected

government. While this may not be a direct impact, it implies that the public - and public opinion - should be considered a contextual factor informing decision-making, but not the only factor.

One-third of respondents pointed explicitly to the importance of economic pressures during the Romanow government's first term in office. Many more also noted that these economic and other pressures meant that post-secondary education simply wasn't on the government's agenda. Others noted that as demand for access to post-secondary education continued, then government had conflicting messaging about whether or not there actually was a problem around tuition fees and student loans. Internal conflicts within the policy community, however, were also highlighted as being important elements of the environment that could impact government responsiveness to public opinion on post-secondary education policy: if the community is divided, then it becomes easier to ignore some of their voices. Elected officials pointed to all of these reasons for why government may not have responded to public opinion. However, university presidents and student union representatives argued that factors internal to the community were primary, followed by the economic pressures in the environment.

While many respondents argued that there should be a role for public opinion in policy making, they emphasized limitations in a perfect correlation between opinion and policy linked to how opinion is measured, the conflict between leadership and the public (or the leadership versus pandering conundrum), and ignorant/unknowledgeable opinion. Respondents pointed to a series of tactics that could be used to bridge gaps between public opinion and policy, including better communications with the public, educating the public - implying that the public was not knowledgeable/informed on an

issue - or just accepting that there would be a gap. A very small number of elected officials and student union representatives and the majority of media respondents said that a policy that was not well-received should be scrapped, but the vast majority of respondents said that government should continue on with implementation and do a better job of communicating/educating the mass public and specific publics. This is much more in line with some of the other Canadian literature about opinion-policy responsiveness, which has focused on government's use of public opinion research for communication purposes (Butler 2005; Page 2006; Ponting 2006). It is also in line with much of the literature that emphasizes the limitations of opinion due to the general lack of specialized knowledge within the public (Bourdieu 1979). It also helps to explain why respondents tended to emphasize the role of specific publics in this policy area – something that is also in line with the literature (Glynn et al 2006; Page 2006).

Respondents pointed to a number of reasons why post-secondary education might be seen as a unique policy area with regard to responsiveness. Those from all of the policy community groups talked about education being a second-rate priority, especially next to health. This was one of the only things that all of them mentioned. Given that federal funding for health, post-secondary education, and welfare was combined in one transfer to the province for much of the time period covered by this research, it was inevitable to compare spending on education to spending on health. Others said that most of the push to better support investments in post-secondary education actually came from specialized groups and from within government itself, rather than from the wider population – at least in the earlier years of the 1991-2004 time period.

There is an argument in the literature around policy creation that emphasizes the importance of the focus of the policy – who/which population is understood to be the beneficiary(ies) of the policy (Ingram and Schneider 1991). In post-secondary education policy, as access to education increased – as defined by enrolment in all areas of post-secondary study – the definition of those benefiting from policies such as student loan and tuition fee policies changed. As demonstrated through the public opinion assessment throughout the 1991-2004 period, Saskatchewan people increasingly raised concerns about the cost of education (tuition fees) and the impact that restricted access to student loans would have on the middle class. Access to post-secondary education became (at least in part) a problem not for the poorest people (who were perceived to have greater access to borrowing) but for those who were marginally better off or middle class. However, there was also a growing emphasis on the need to have individual students “investing” in their own education because of the perceived returns on investment, to be gained through better employment prospects and higher salaries.

These changing conceptions of who participates (or could participate) in post-secondary education, who should pay, the benefits of education, and who was being left behind were superimposed on the discussion of the quality of education being provided and whether or not students were “deserving” of additional government support. There is often a disconnect between the recipients of financial transfers and their political clout: in this case, the impact of students was differentially felt throughout the 1991-2004 period. This may also be related to demographics, and who holds power and why. Over half of respondents said that demographics – particularly the perceived age of

university students and student loan borrowers – had an impact on policy making. How student leaders saw themselves impacting public policy varied. Several pointed to the importance of students' parents – largely baby boomers – and the expression of their opinions and votes throughout this period.

Policy community actors did not agree amongst themselves whether or not the perception of students as non-voters may have an impact on whether their opinions were incorporated into the policy making process. Elected officials and public opinion researchers said that demographics *did* have an impact, while ministerial assistants, media, and university presidents said that they may have an impact. One respondent, a baby boomer, noted that this also related to the trade-offs between education (and everything else) and health – that there were other policy priorities. Overall, respondents felt that demographics mattered either because of students' characteristics (youth, non-voting) or because of baby boomers' characteristics (older, voting, more important demographic). Those who reported that demographics didn't matter pointed to the connection between students and their families, disunity within the student community having a bigger impact, and other policy priorities taking attention away from student concerns.

Overall, no one theory of democratic responsiveness is adequate to explain the relationship(s) between public opinion and public policy in Saskatchewan's post-secondary policy arena between 1991 and 2004. As might be expected, different theories can be used to understand these relationships at different points in time, within differing political/social/ environmental contexts, and with different actors involved in the policy community. Respondents from the 1991-2004 period literally pointed to

every issue raised in responsiveness theory in explaining both why public policy might respond to or reflect public opinion and why it may not.

Concluding Remarks: Implications, Limitations, and Further Research

These research results have implications for how we think about elections, agenda-setting, policy making, and the links between public opinion and public policy. Many scholars point to the importance of gaining and maintaining public support for government decisions (Page 2006; Courtney 2004; Skogstad 2005). Gaining support is often discussed through the lens of election results: the party winning the election and forming government is seen to have the support of the citizens. However, most respondents for this project did not consider election results to be a good reflection of public opinion. This may be linked to continually declining voter numbers. However, it may also be connected to the reality that elected officials (and others) would go to friends, family, and constituents if they wanted a "good" assessment of public opinion. It may also be a reflection of a more open process of policy formulation, which includes more opportunities for involvement of the public(s) throughout (Skogstad 2003; 2005). Additionally, some researchers have noted that electoral cycles may not have an impact on policy at all (Serletis and Afxentiou 1998). This is not to say that elections are not important, because clearly, they have value. However, they may not be as important as other expressions of public opinion for the creation and implementation of public policy. Respondents did point to the possible impact of public opinion through shaping election discourse – if an issue was important enough to the public, it should become part of the discussion during an election.

The value of polling for policy-related activities comes through in this research. While respondents pointed to a number of other ways to assess the public's opinions and emphasized the range of problems with public opinion polling methodology and public release, they still concluded that polling remained an important part of the government's toolbox in Saskatchewan. This is an important point to note, as it is in part related to Saskatchewan's ability (until recently) to conduct reliable telephone-based surveys of the population. It is only recently that the province's polling industry has included a growing firm focused on mixed methods research, with an emphasis on online research. While access to the internet is relatively widespread in Saskatchewan, the use of the telephone survey still prevails. Given the growing prevalence of cell-phone-only households, this may not be the case for much longer. Response rates have been declining, and while some research firms will argue that this has not impacted their ability to obtain reliable results, as Saskatchewan's demographics change, this may not be the reality for too much longer.

One of the implications of this research is a contribution to the discussion around instrument choice. When looking at the changes in tuition fees and in student loan policies over the years, it becomes clear that the instruments themselves – a combination of loans, grants, family support, and public funds for institutions – are not being seriously revisited. When the Premier and opposition leaders proposed additional grant funds to support students in the 1999 election, for example, the public response was less than receptive. We know that instrument choice is impacted by politics – what is politically feasible – as well as by the economics of what is financially possible. It also must be in line with previous decisions (Peters and van Nispen 1998). It can have

a strong symbolic aspect, reflecting the wants and desires of the public. There is a tradition of using voluntary and mixed instruments in this area (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Howlett 2005), drawing on supports from families and communities as well as a combination of grants and loans to support access to post-secondary education. It seems unlikely that the information gathered by government during this time – including that gathered through the student loan review survey in the late 1990s – would have much of an impact on the current instruments at work in this area.

There are limitations in the research and instrument design that need to be considered when assessing the results of the research. The first limitations are related directly to the composition and size of the sample and the impact of historical research. Second are a series of limitations related to the questionnaire and interview design. These limitations are important to consider, and have implications for how these results may be used.

It may be argued that an overrepresentation of student union representatives in the sample could skew the overall results. However, given that there were so many more student union representatives in the population, I would argue that they are not over-represented – in fact, they may be under-represented proportionally when compared to how many there actually were during that time period. Additionally, there were four former deputy ministers who participated in the self-administered questionnaire but none were interviewed for this project. While the questionnaire provided useful information, the interview enabled further detailed discussion about some of the key concepts explored in the questionnaire. Lacking this information is

regrettable, but did not compromise the overall findings of the research: rather, it points to a need for further research with deputy ministers.

There are concerns about the accuracy of memory, particularly for those who were involved in the policy community in the early years of the time period (see Gaskell, Wright and O'Muircheartaigh 2000). While I did make an effort to encourage people to state when they could not remember clearly rather than make a guess at what they thought at the time, that approach may not have always been effective. However, I situated their responses within the context of the policy history, and the vast majority were plausible when comparing them to the publicly documented “reality” of the time. When working with a self-administered questionnaire, it is usually not possible to know what respondents were thinking of when answering specific questions. For example, when policy actors were asked to assess public opinion’s importance for them and then for most other actors, it is not possible to determine who they are thinking of as “most”. In retrospect, it would have been useful to ask respondents what was most important for decision makers in order to have a better point of comparison. Because of this limitation, the results are more ambiguous than would be hoped.

The key informants participating in this project represent a small sample of the overall post-secondary education policy community during the 1991 to 2004 period. As a case study of a particular policy area in the province of Saskatchewan, there are limitations to how the conclusions can be extrapolated and applied to other cases. Saskatchewan has some unique characteristics, in part due to the small and interconnected nature of the policy community. While Saskatchewan did see trends in student loan and tuition fee policy that were common to much of the country as a

whole, the province's government did not restrain funding in the university sector to the same degree as other provinces. Despite this reality, tuition fees increased at a rate higher than any other province in the country except for Alberta. The post-secondary education policy community is a small, interconnected one – it was very common to see student union representatives move from their positions into ministers' offices in government, for example – and the Minister of Finance during the early to mid 1990s was a professor at the University of Saskatchewan. The small sample – encompassing eight different groups of policy community actors – meant that detailed statistically significant analysis by group was not always possible. Thus, although significance testing was included in some cases, many of the results were presented as substantively significant rather than statistically significant. As a result of the small sample, the evidence gathered should be considered preliminary.

Environment is incredibly important in policy making - respondents who were active in different time periods within the research clearly pointed out that factors outside of their control impacted their policy work within this area. These environmental factors are not consistent, but change over time. However, in the context of this dissertation, time is a largely under-explored variable. It is constantly present, and in some cases, becomes an explanatory variable for differences within policy community groups over the course of the 1991-2004 period. Relatedly, environmental factors – including the economy, budget constraints, and the reality of finite resources during at least the first half of the relevant time period – had a tremendous impact on what was considered possible in government spending. Knowing that the province faced the very real possibility of bankruptcy in the early part of Premier Romanow's

first term as Premier had to have an impact on the spending decisions that were – and could be – made during that time.

While it has been possible to address some research questions and hypotheses in this work, there are a number of questions still unanswered and hypotheses still untested. In the course of undertaking this research project, I've identified a number of areas for further research.

The policy community is a useful construct for situating relations between groups within policy making. While this project treated the members of policy community groups as individual units, there was clearly variation in terms of how both individuals and groups interacted with each other throughout the 1991 to 2004 time period. At certain times, university presidents and student union representatives had a much better relationship than at other times. These connections meant that they could present a more united front to government, theoretically making their position - and their voices - more influential.

Conflict between the students' unions at the two universities - evidenced particularly through the USSU's founding of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) while the URSU stayed with the Canadian Federation of Students. Although the two students unions often remained ideologically opposed, the times when they did work together – prior to the 1999 election, for example – they did seem to be more effective at influencing the agenda. Similarly, when there was coordination between the two university presidents, post-secondary education – and funds supporting the universities – seemed to be more attended to than during other times. More research on the value of these groups and the impact of their

interrelationships would help to build on the policy community literature, while exploring further the impact of individuals and collaboration within the policy community itself.

Many questions could be addressed by further mining this data. Using time, age, and ideology as variables (for example) would allow for a different lens to be applied to analysis of interconnections between public opinion and public policy. There is little gendered work in this area, and undertaking that work would make a contribution. Further, exploring the impact of age on the questions around policy and opinion would help to create a better understanding of the role that intergenerational transfer might play in policy making, tying in to a larger discussion around intergenerational equity in public policy. Although additional cases may be necessary to create a more robust sample to work with, this could add to the discussion around intergenerational equity.

Deputy ministers hold an interesting interstitial position within government, occupying the space(s) between elected officials and all other civil servants in their department(s). This interstitiality became clear throughout this research, as deputy ministers responses were close to those of elected officials some of the time and with senior civil servants at other times. This raises questions about how the most senior civil servants make use of public opinion in their interactions with both groups of people, and how that impacts public policy development and implementation.

Further analysis could work toward a different understanding of the value and utility of various expressions of public opinion by grouping them into active and

passive forms of expression. This might help to explain further why some expressions are more valued than others, aside from the initial conclusions proposed.

It would be helpful to re-examine policy actors' opinions of the various expressions of public opinion, having moved into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Although the provincial government continues to undertake and publish the results of opinion polling, it is clear that the amount of polling has decreased considerably. Has this been replaced with other forms of public opinion research? Are there other expressions of public opinion, like talk radio commentators, for example, that have become more important over time? Has social media - including blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and others - had an impact on how policy actors think about public opinion? About the value of opinion as expressed through these venues? Further interviews or questionnaires would help to explore these questions.

Despite the limitations of the research and the further questions to be answered, this research project makes a number of important contributions to the literature around decision-making, policy communities, and the connections between public opinion and public policy. It speaks to four of the main gaps within the opinion-policy literature, by examining a provincial case study in a policy area of provincial jurisdiction, post-secondary education funding policy, which is traditionally under-explored. It situates the case within its historical context to better understand contextual and environmental factors that can influence and constrain the impact that public opinion could have on public policy and decision-making within a provincial jurisdiction.

This research diverges from and contributes to the literature by using a broad definition of public opinion – comprising sixteen ways of measuring opinion – rather

than the traditionally narrow conception of opinion as measured through public opinion polling. Knowing that a variety of measures of public opinion matter to policy community members broadens our thinking around what it means for public opinion to influence policy. This research project contributes to a clearer understanding of where in the policy cycle public opinion might matter more, and who it matters to at what points. Thinking about public policy as more than simply an outcome re-frames our thinking on the relationship between opinion and policy. Overall, this project has begun to address many of the gaps in opinion-policy research, and has laid the groundwork for a more expansive look at some of these gaps. It turns out that public opinion does matter for policy and decision-making, and this research helps us to better understand how, when, and for whom it matters.

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**APPENDIX A PACKAGE FOR KEY INFORMANTS (LETTERS 1 AND 2,
CONSENT FORM, QUESTIONNAIRE)**



Carleton
UNIVERSITY

[FIRST LETTER]

[DATE]

[RESPONDENT'S NAME AND ADDRESS]

*Re Research Project “Does Public Opinion Count? Tuition Fees, Student Support,
and Public Opinion in Saskatchewan, 1990 to 2004”*

Dear [RESPONDENT]:

My name is Andrea Rounce, and I am a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. I am inviting you, as a former [RELEVANT POSITION IN POLICY COMMUNITY], to participate in a research project that examines public opinion and student financial assistance policy between 1990 and 2004 in Saskatchewan. The research is part of a project being conducted for my PhD dissertation work, and will help contribute to the understanding of how public opinion – particularly around post-secondary education funding in Saskatchewan – is defined by different groups of political actors, including public servants, elected officials, political staff, interest groups, political parties, journalists, and communications people. Understanding how public opinion is defined is an important part of understanding what role public opinion may play in public policy making.

The Research Project

The research project consists of two parts: a short questionnaire (enclosed) that can be completed and returned by mail in the enclosed stamped and addressed envelope and a telephone interview, to be scheduled at your convenience. The questionnaire should take no more than 10 minutes of your time, and the telephone interview is expected to take between 30 and 40 minutes in total. In order to ensure that transcriptions of the interviews are as accurate as possible and reflect what was said, these interviews will be digitally recorded with your permission. If you would prefer that your interview not be recorded, please let the researcher know in advance.

Ensuring Confidentiality and Security of Information

This research project has been reviewed and received clearance by the Research Ethics Committee at Carleton University, and will be conducted in order to ensure the maximum levels of confidentiality and privacy for research participants. Any information you provide in the course of this project will be treated as confidential and your name will not be attributed to your responses in any way. This information provided by yourself and others participating in the project will be aggregated and analysed by varying groups of participants, rather than on an individual basis.

Information from both stages (questionnaire and interview) will be valuable for this project. However, if you are unable to participate in the interview portion of the research project but can complete and return the questionnaire (along with the consent form) it would be greatly appreciated. You may choose not to participate in any stage of the project (or have your information withdrawn at a later point). The enclosed consent form outlines the key points of the research project and what is being asked of you as a research participant, and must be filled out and returned with the questionnaire before moving into the interview process. At the end of the consent form you will see a place for you to indicate your availability for a follow-up interview.

Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. There is no foreseen risk to you in this process, and your participation will help to advance our understanding of the role of public opinion in public policy formation and of Saskatchewan post-secondary education funding policy more generally.

Use of Information

The information collected will be used for a dissertation project and related conference presentations and journal publications. When the project has been completed, you will receive a summary of the highlights of the results. If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a participant in the study and wish to contact the Chair of the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee, Professor Antonio Gualtieri, he can be reached by mail at Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B5; or by telephone at 613-520-2517; or by email at ethics@carleton.ca.

Interviews are scheduled to take place between [DATES], on a daily basis (including weekends and evenings). If you choose to take part in this project and indicate preferred interview times on the consent form, a researcher will follow up with you to confirm an interview time. If you have any questions or prefer to set up an interview by telephone or email, please feel free to contact me at (306) 585-5468 or by email at arounce@connect.carleton.ca.

Many thanks for your participation in this important project.

Best regards,

Andrea Rounce
PhD Candidate
Department of Political Science
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
arounce@connect.carleton.ca

Scott Bennett, PhD
PhD Supervisor and Professor
Department of Political Science
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
sbennett@ccs.carleton.ca



[FOLLOW UP LETTER]

[DATE]

[RESPONDENT'S NAME AND ADDRESS]

***Re Research Project “Does Public Opinion Count? Tuition Fees, Student Support,
and Public Opinion in Saskatchewan, 1990 to 2004”***

Dear [RESPONDENT]:

My name is Andrea Rounce, and I am a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. I am inviting you, as a former [POSITION IN POLICY COMMUNITY], to participate in a research project that examines public opinion and student financial assistance policy between 1990 and 2004 in Saskatchewan. As you may remember from a previously mailed package, this research is part of a project being conducted for my PhD dissertation work. It will help contribute to the understanding of how public opinion – particularly around post-secondary education funding in Saskatchewan – is defined by different groups of political actors, including public servants, elected officials, political staff, interest groups, political parties, journalists, and communications people. Understanding how public opinion is defined is an important part of understanding what role public opinion may play in public policy making. So far many people have contributed their ideas and experiences to this project, and I’m hoping that you would be willing to take the time to do so as well.

The Research Project

The research project consists of two parts: a short questionnaire (enclosed) that can be completed and returned by mail in the enclosed stamped and addressed envelope and a telephone interview, to be scheduled at your convenience. The questionnaire should take no more than 10 minutes of your time, and the telephone interview is expected to take between 30 and 40 minutes in total. In order to ensure that transcriptions of the interviews are as accurate as possible and reflect what was said, these interviews will be digitally recorded with your permission. If you would prefer that your interview not be recorded, please let the researcher know in advance.

Ensuring Confidentiality and Security of Information

This research project has been reviewed and received clearance by the Research Ethics Committee at Carleton University, and will be conducted in order to ensure the maximum levels of confidentiality and privacy for research participants. Any information you provide in the course of this project will be treated as confidential and your name will not be attributed to your responses in any way. This information provided by yourself and others participating in the project will be aggregated and analysed by varying groups of participants, rather than on an individual basis.

Information from both stages (questionnaire and interview) will be valuable for this project. However, if you are unable to participate in the interview portion of the research project but can complete and return the questionnaire (along with the consent form) it would be greatly appreciated. You may choose not to participate in any stage of the project (or have your information withdrawn at a later point). The enclosed consent form outlines the key points of the research project and what is being asked of you as a research participant, and must be filled out and returned with the questionnaire before moving into the interview process. At the end of the consent form you will see a place for you to indicate your availability for a follow-up interview.

Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. There is no foreseen risk to you in this process, and your participation will help to advance our understanding of the role of public opinion in public policy formation and of Saskatchewan post-secondary education funding policy more generally.

Use of Information

The information collected will be used for a dissertation project and related conference presentations and journal publications. When the project has been completed, you will receive a summary of the highlights of the results. If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a participant in the study and wish to contact the Chair of the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee, Professor Antonio Gualtieri, he can be reached by mail at Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B5; or by telephone at 613-520-2517; or by email at ethics@carleton.ca.

Interviews are scheduled to take place between [DATES], on a daily basis (including weekends and evenings). If you choose to take part in this project and indicate preferred interview times on the consent form, a researcher will follow up with you to confirm an interview time. If you have any questions or prefer to set up an interview by telephone or email, please feel free to contact me at (306) 359-1432 or by email at arounce@connect.carleton.ca.

Many thanks for your participation in this important project.

Best regards,

Andrea Rounce
PhD Candidate
Department of Political Science
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
arounce@connect.carleton.ca

Scott Bennett, PhD
PhD Supervisor and Professor
Department of Political Science
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
sbennett@ccs.carleton.ca

(306) 359-1432



Informed Consent Form

Research Project “Does Public Opinion Count? Tuition Fees, Student Support, and Public Opinion in Saskatchewan, 1990 to 2004”

As a [POLICY COMMUNITY GROUP], you are invited to participate in a research study that will help contribute to the understanding of how public opinion – particularly around post-secondary education funding in Saskatchewan – is defined by different groups of political actors, including public servants, elected officials, political staff, interest groups, political parties, journalists, and communications people. Understanding how public opinion is defined is an important part of understanding what role public opinion may play in public policy making.

Information

The research project consists of two parts: a short questionnaire that can be completed and returned by mail in the enclosed stamped and addressed envelope and a telephone interview, to be scheduled at your convenience. The questionnaire should take no more than 10 minutes of your time, and the telephone interview is expected to take between 30 and 40 minutes in total. In order to ensure that transcriptions of the interviews are as accurate as possible and reflect what was said, these interviews will be digitally recorded with your permission. If you would prefer that your interview not be recorded, please let the researcher know in advance.

Risks And Benefits

There is no foreseen risk to you in this process, and your participation will help to advance our understanding of the role of public opinion in public policy formation and of Saskatchewan post-secondary education funding policy more generally.

Confidentiality

Any information you provide in the course of this project will be treated as confidential and your name will not be attributed to your responses in any way. This information provided by yourself and others participating in the project will be aggregated and analysed by group of participants, rather than on an individual basis.

Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you give permission in writing to do otherwise. The information collected will be used for a dissertation project and related conference presentations and journal

publications. When the project has been completed, you will receive a summary of the research results.

Contact

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Andrea Rounce, at (306) 359-1432 or by email at arounce@connect.carleton.ca.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in the study and wish to contact the Chair of the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee, Professor Antonio Gualtieri, he can be reached by mail at Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B5; or by telephone at 613-520-2517; or by email at ethics@carleton.ca.

Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

Consent and Interview Availability

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's name (print) _____

Participant's signature _____

Reminder: Interviews are scheduled to take place between [DATES], with some flexibility throughout for evenings and weekends.

First Choice for Interview Date/Time: _____

Second Choice for Interview Date/Time: _____

Telephone Contact Information for Interview: _____

Date _____

**Does Public Opinion Count?
Tuition Fees, Student Support, and Public Opinion in Saskatchewan, 1990-2004**

Questionnaire

Policy Community Context

You received this questionnaire because of your previous involvement in the Saskatchewan post-secondary education policy community, as noted in the covering letter.

1. When you were involved in the post-secondary education policy community, were you a:

Advocacy Groups

- Student Union Representative
 University President

Political Parties

- Elected Party Representative (e.g. Party President)
 Pollster

Media

- Journalist/Reporter/Columnist

Government

- Deputy Minister
 Communications Official
 Senior Public Servant (e.g. Policy-related)
 Minister responsible for Post-Secondary Education
 Pollster (working with/for government)

Opposition

- Caucus Communications Staff (including Directors)
 M.L.A with Critic responsibility for Post-Secondary Education

2. In what year or years did you hold this position?

- 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997
 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004

Understanding Public Opinion and Public Policy

3. There are many ways for policy actors to understand what the public is thinking about. In general, which of the following would you currently consider to be good reflections of public opinion?

	Very good	Somewhat good	Not very good	Not at all good	Not Applicable
Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Letters to the Editor	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Commentators' Opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Callers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Family	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Communications from constituents/those you represented	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by the provincial government	<input type="checkbox"/>				

	Very good	Somewhat good	Not very good	Not at all good	Not Applicable
Polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling made public by the media	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Media (In general)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Interest/advocacy group communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Lobbyists' communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Election results	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public protests and demonstrations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public consultations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/>				

4. How important were the following forms of public opinion for you in your previous work?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important	Not Applicable
Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Letters to the Editor	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Commentators' Opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Callers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Family	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Communications from constituents/those you represented	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by the provincial government	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling Conducted by Media	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Media (In general)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Lobbyists' communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Election results	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public protests and demonstrations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public consultations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Interest/advocacy group communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/>				

5. As part of your previous work, how often would you have consulted these forms of public opinion?

	Very Often	Somewhat often	Not very often	Rarely/ Never	Not Applicable
Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Letters to the Editor	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Commentators' Opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Callers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Family	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Communications from constituents/those you represented	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by the provincial government	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Media (In general)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Interest/advocacy group communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Lobbyists' communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Election results	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public protests and demonstrations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public consultations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/>				

6.a. In your previous work, was there ever a time or times when it seemed like the majority of opinion sources (e.g. polling, interest group communications, public demonstrations) supported a particular policy course or direction?

Yes No (If no, please move to question 7.)

6.b. If yes, did you support moving in that direction?

Yes No

6.c. Please describe that time, including whether there was a particular expression of public opinion that had more impact than the others.

7. **In general**, how important do you think the following types of public opinion are for policy decision-makers? (Please check one box for each response.)

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important	Not Applicable
Newspaper editorials/opinion pieces	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Letters to the Editor	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Commentators' Opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talk radio: Callers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Family	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Communications from constituents/those you represented	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by the provincial government	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling commissioned by political parties (either your own, or another)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Polling Conducted by Media	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Media (In general)	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Interest/advocacy group communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Lobbyists' communications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Election results	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public protests and demonstrations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Public consultations	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/>				

8. At what point in the policy-making cycle do you think public opinion was of the most value to you?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Raising awareness about an issue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Establishing the nature of the public discussion around that issue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gathering evidence used to examine the issue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Limiting the range of policy options available to decision-makers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shaping the communications around the resulting decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluation of the resulting policy or program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other point in the process? _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Generally speaking, at what point in the policy-making process do you think public opinion is of the most value to most policy actors?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Raising awareness about an issue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Establishing the nature of the public discussion around that issue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gathering evidence used to examine the issue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Limiting the range of policy options available to decision-makers (or establishing parameters around decision-making)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shaping the communications around the resulting decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluation of the resulting policy or program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other point in the process? _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10.a. Do you think that having public opinion research conducted by the Government of Saskatchewan made public on a regular basis has made that research more valuable or less valuable as a result?

More Less

10.b. Why or why not?

Demographic Information *(Used for aggregate analysis only)*

11. Your sex: female male

12. On a seven-point scale, where 1 means the far left on the Canadian political spectrum and 7 means the far right, where would you place yourself on the scale? Please check one only.

Left 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Uncertain Right

13. In what year were you born? _____

Final Comments

14. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you very much for completing this survey! Your participation is very much appreciated.

APPENDIX B POLICY CYCLE ACTIVITIES BY POLICY COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP

Raising Awareness about an Issue: Agenda-Setting

Policy Community Membership

There were differences among members of the policy community, as shown in Figure B.1. Ministerial assistants (100%, n=2) said that public opinion was somewhat important in raising awareness about an issue, while elected officials (100%, n=2) identified public opinion as being very important for this area. Deputy ministers were split, with 75% (n=3) saying that public opinion was very important and 25% (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important. Senior civil servants were divided as well, with 40% (n=4) reporting that public opinion was very important, and 60% (n=6) saying that it was somewhat important.

Two-thirds (67%, n=2) of media respondents said that public opinion was very important in raising awareness about an issue, while 33% (n=1) said that it was somewhat important. Half of the public opinion researchers (50%, n=1) said that public opinion was very important, but half (50%, n=1) said that it was not very important at all. This public opinion researcher was the only one who reported that public opinion was not very important in agenda-setting.

University presidents were divided on this subject, with 67% (n=2) saying that public opinion was very important and 33% (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important. Finally, student union representatives were less convinced about the importance of public opinion in agenda-setting, with 22% (n=2) saying that it was very important and 78% (n=7) saying that it was somewhat important.

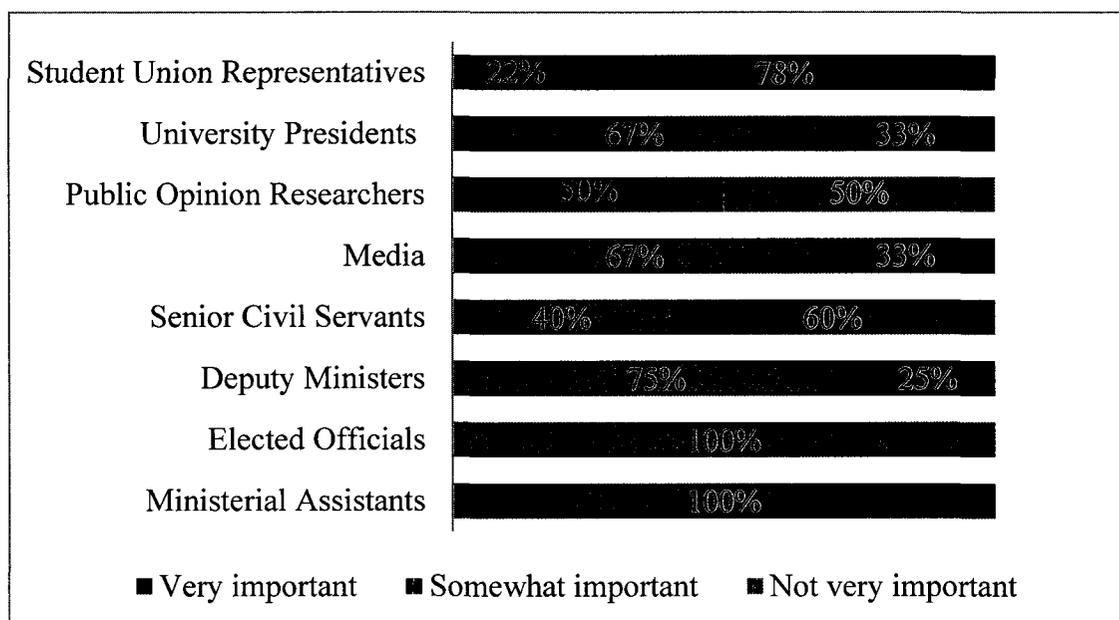


Figure B.1: Importance of Public Opinion in Raising Awareness about an Issue for Respondents by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

For Most

Some respondent groups had different opinions on how important public opinion was in raising awareness about an issue for most policy actors than for themselves, as shown in Figure B.2. More than half of the student union representatives (56%, n=5) indicated that public opinion was very important and 44% (n=4) said that it was somewhat important, an increase over the percent who said that it was important for them. Public opinion researchers remained split on this question, although half (50%, n=1) said that public opinion was very important in raising awareness about an issue for most policy actors while the other half (50%, n=1) said that it was somewhat important – a change from the perception of what was important for themselves.

All of the media respondents (100%, n=3) said that public opinion was very important for most policy actors, a difference from how they had assessed public

opinion's importance in raising awareness for themselves. Senior civil servants' opinions were slightly different, with 50% (n=5) saying that public opinion was very important for raising awareness about an issue for most policy actors and 50% (n=5) saying that it was somewhat important – a slight change from the 60%/40% split when they assessed public opinion's importance for themselves in their work.

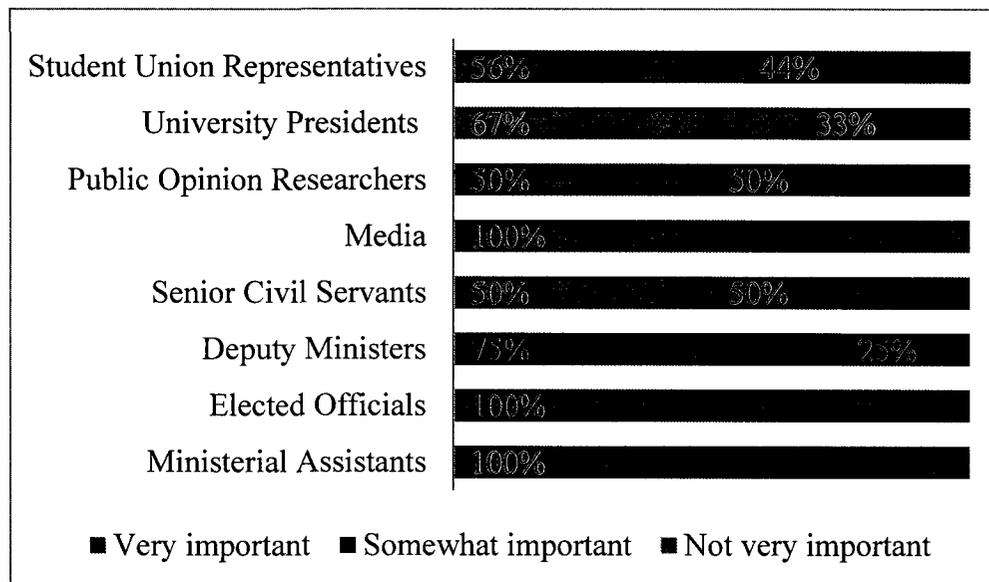


Figure B.2: Importance of Public Opinion in Raising Awareness about an Issue for Most Policy Actors by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

University presidents, elected officials, ministerial assistants, deputy ministers all assessed the importance of public opinion for themselves in their work as having the same level of importance for most policy actors.

Establishing the Nature of the Policy Discussion

Policy Community Membership

There were some greater differences among the members of the policy community when it came to assessing the importance of public opinion in establishing the nature of the policy discussion, as shown in Figure B.3. Ministerial assistants, elected officials, and deputy ministers were all split, with 50% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important in establishing the nature of the policy discussion, while the other 50% (n=1) said that public opinion was somewhat important.

Senior civil servants gave varied responses, with 10% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important in establishing the nature of the policy discussion, 70% (n=7) saying that public opinion was somewhat important, and 20% (n=2) saying that it was not very important at all. Media respondents also were split on public opinion's importance in this area, with 33% (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important and 67% (n=2) saying that it was not very important. Public opinion researchers said that public opinion was important: 50% (n=1) said it was very important and 50% (n=1) said that it was somewhat important.

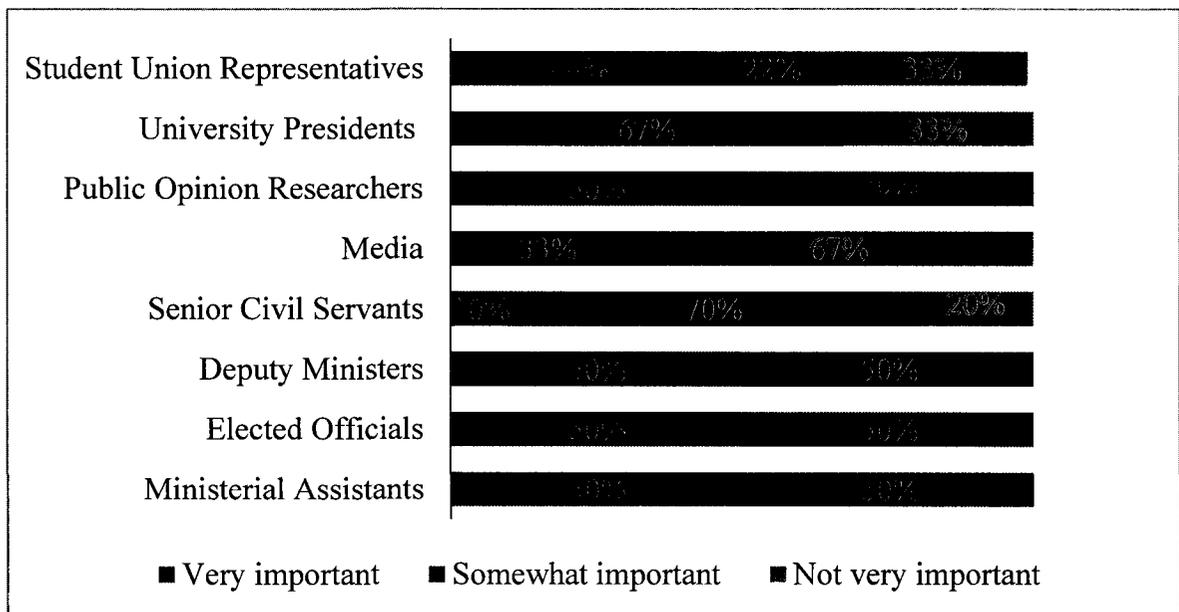


Figure B.3: Importance of Public Opinion in Establishing the Nature of the Policy Discussion for Respondents by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

Two-thirds (67%, n=2) of university presidents said that public opinion was somewhat important, while one-third (33%, n=1) said that it was not very important. Student union representatives also gave varied responses, with 44% (n=4) saying that public opinion was very important, 22% (n=2) saying that it was somewhat important, and 33% (n=3) saying that it was not very important at all.

For Most

The majority of policy community respondents reported that public opinion's importance in establishing the nature of the policy discussion was different for themselves in their previous work than for most policy actors, as shown in Figure B.4. Student union representatives assessed public opinion's importance differently for most policy actors, with 33% (n=3) saying that it was very important, 33% (n=3) that it was

somewhat important, 22% (n=2) saying that it was not very important, and 11% (n=1) reporting that it was not at all important for most policy actors.

University presidents were equally divided, with 33% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important, 33% (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important, and 33% (n=1) saying that it was not very important for most policy actors in establishing the nature of the policy discussion. Public opinion researchers remained split, but differed in their assessment of public opinion's value for most in this area: 50% (n=1) said that it was very important while 50% (n=1) said that it was not very important at all.

Senior civil servants assessed public opinion's importance slightly differently for most actors than for themselves: 20% (n=2) said that it was very important, 60% (n=6) that it was somewhat important, and 20% (n=2) that it was not very important at all. Deputy ministers were also slightly different in their assessment: 25% (n=1) said that it was very important while 75% (n=3) said that it was somewhat important – a slightly greater percentage than had said it was somewhat important for themselves in their work. Ministerial assistants agreed that public opinion was somewhat important (100%, n=2) for most policy actors, instead of being split between an assessment of very important and one of somewhat important as they were for themselves.

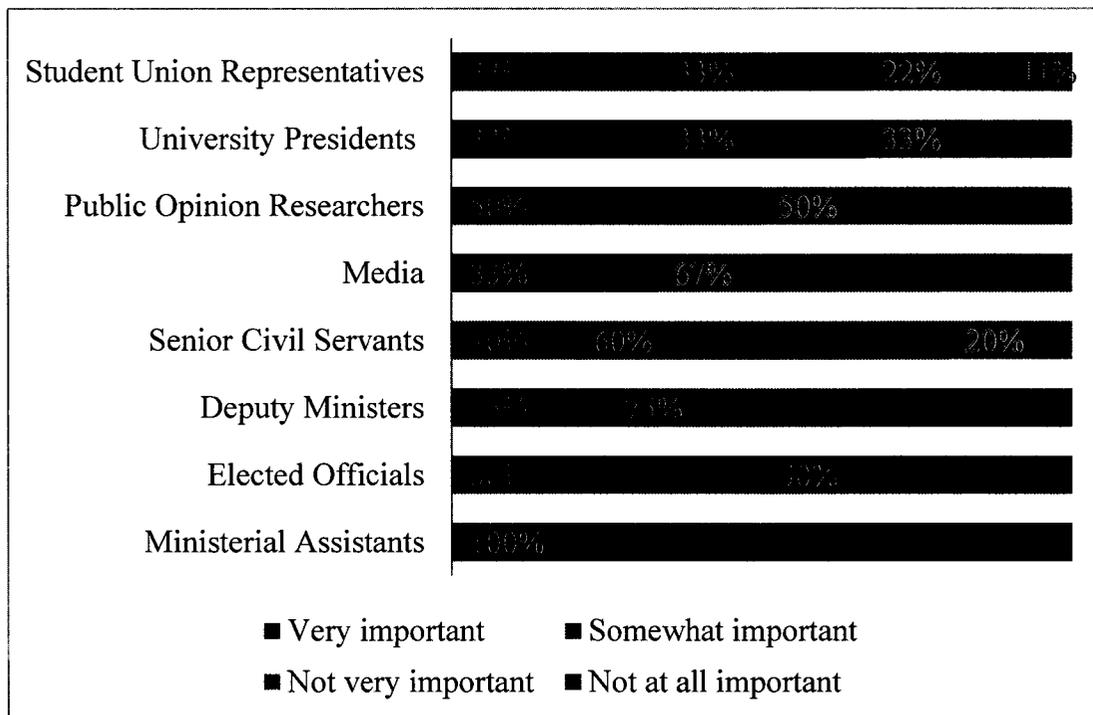


Figure B.4: Importance of Public Opinion in Establishing the Nature of the Policy Discussion for Most Policy Actors by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

Media and elected officials assessed the importance of public opinion for themselves in their work as having the same level of importance for most policy actors.

Gathering Evidence for Policy-Making

Policy Community Membership

As with other activities of the policy cycle, there were differences among policy community groups when it came to assessing the importance of public opinion in gathering evidence for policy making. Ministerial assistants were split, with 50% (n=1) saying that public opinion was somewhat important in gathering evidence for policy-

making, while 50% (n=1) said that it was not very important. Elected officials had the same opinions.

Deputy ministers all expressed that public opinion was important in gathering evidence for policy-making, with 50% (n=2) saying that it was very important and 50% (n=2) saying that it was somewhat important. Senior civil servants were more divided, with 20% (n=2) reporting that public opinion was very important, 40% (n=4) saying that it was somewhat important, and 40% (n=4) saying that it was not very important at all in gathering evidence for policy-making.

One-third (33%, n=1) of media respondents said that public opinion was very important while two-thirds (67%, n=1) said that it was not very important at all when gathering evidence. Public opinion researchers were generally more favourable, with 50% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important and 50% (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important.

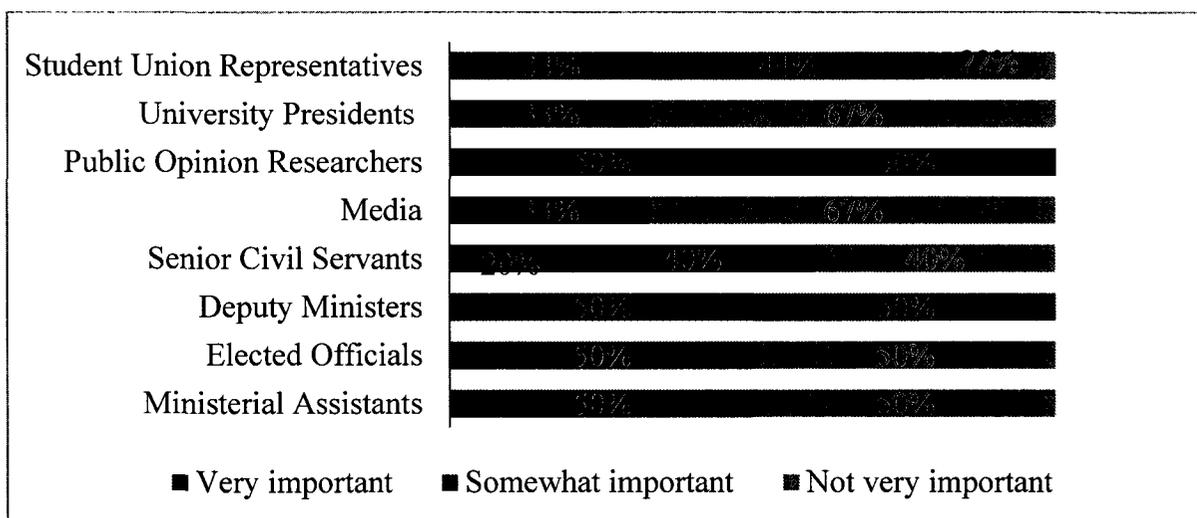


Figure B.5: Importance of Public Opinion in Gathering Evidence for Policy-Making for Respondents by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

University presidents mirrored the media, with 33% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important and 67% (n=2) saying that it was not very important. Student union representatives were most like senior civil servants in their distribution, with 33% (n=3) saying that public opinion was very important in gathering evidence for policy-making, 44% (n=4) saying that it was somewhat important, and 22% (n=2) saying that it was not very important at all.

For Most

There were some differences between how policy community members assessed the importance of public opinion in gathering evidence for policy-making for themselves in their work and for most policy actors. Student union representatives were split, with 44% (n=4) saying that public opinion was very important for most, 44% (n=4) saying that it was somewhat important, and 11% (n=1) responding that public opinion was not very important for most policy actors. University presidents were evenly distributed, with one-third (33%, n=1) in each of the very important, somewhat important, and not very important categories. Media respondents were also slightly different when assessing public opinion's importance for most policy actors compared with themselves: two-thirds (67%, n=1) said that public opinion was very important for most policy actors and one-third (33%, n=1) said that it was somewhat important.

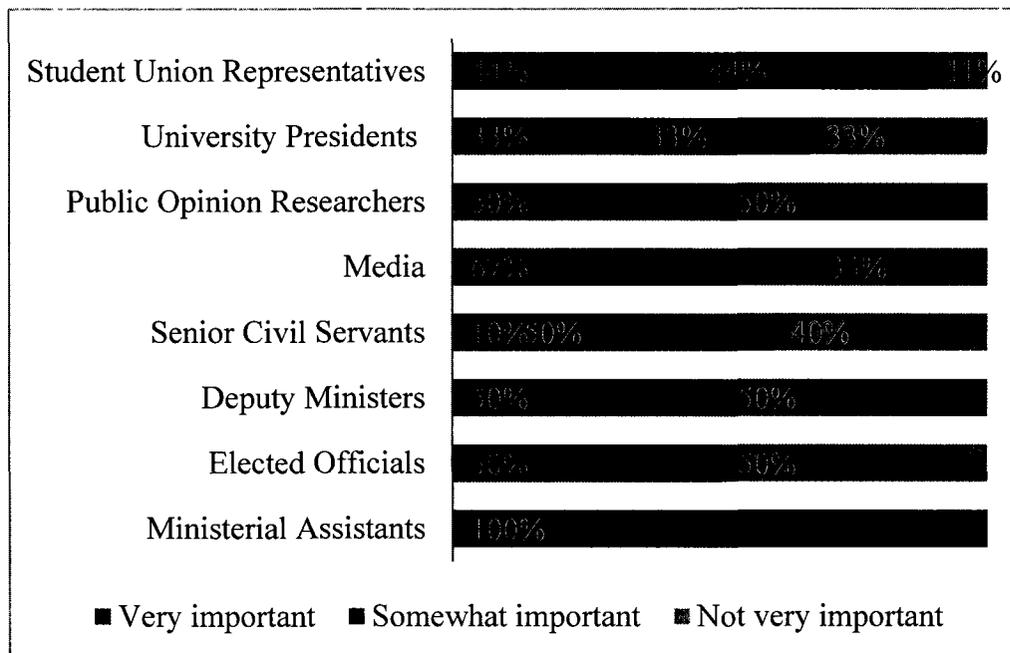


Figure B.6: Importance of Public Opinion in Gathering Evidence for Policy-Making for Most by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

Senior civil servants were distributed in a similar way when assessing public opinion's importance for most policy actors, with 10% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important, 50% (n=5) saying that it was somewhat important, and 40% (n=4) saying that it was not very important. Ministerial assistants were in agreement that public opinion was somewhat important (100%, n=2) in gathering evidence for most policy actors. Although half (50%, n=1) had said that public opinion wasn't important for them in their work, they recognized its importance for others.

Public opinion researchers, deputy ministers, elected officials assessed the importance of public opinion in gathering evidence for policy-making for themselves in their work as having the same level of importance for most policy actors.

Limiting the Range of Options Considered for Policy-Making

Policy Community Membership

Ministerial assistants and elected officials were both split, with 50% (n=1) of both saying that public opinion was somewhat important in limiting the range of options in decision-making and 50% (n=1) saying that public opinion was not very important in this area. Deputy ministers were roughly proportioned in the same way, with 43% (n=3) saying that public opinion was somewhat important and 57% (n=4) saying that it was not very important.

Senior civil servants were divided as well, but both groups agreed that public opinion was important in limiting the range of options in decision-making: 40% (n=4) said that it was very important and 60% (n=6) said that it was somewhat important. Media respondents were split in the same way as ministerial assistants, elected officials, and deputy ministers, with 33% (n=1) saying that public opinion was somewhat important and 67% (n=2) saying that it was not very important. Public opinion researchers thought that public opinion was important in limiting the range of options in decision-making, with 50% (n=1) saying that it was very important and 50% (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important.

University presidents were split across these three categories: 33% (n=1) said that public opinion was very important, 33% (n=1) said that it was somewhat important, and 33% (n=1) said that it was not very important. Student union representatives had a similar distribution to senior civil servants and public opinion researchers, with 56% (n=5) saying that public opinion was very important and 44% (n=4) saying that it was somewhat important in limiting the range of options for decision-making.

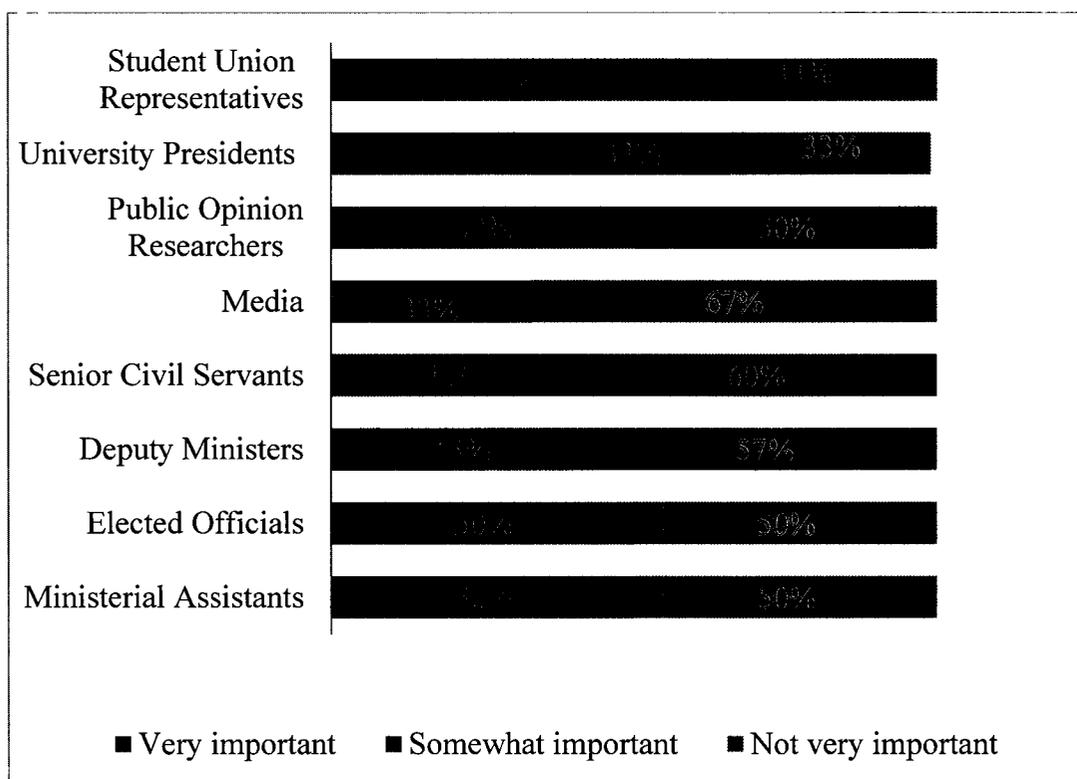


Figure B.7: Importance of Public Opinion in Limiting the Range of Options for Respondents by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

For Most

Public opinion researchers agreed (100%, n=2) that public opinion was somewhat important in limiting the range of options for most policy actors, while media respondents were split: two-thirds (67%, n=2) said that public opinion was very important and 33% (n=1) said that it was not very important for most policy actors. One-quarter (25%, n=1) of deputy minister respondents said that public opinion was very important for most in limiting the range of options, while three-quarters (75%, n=3) said that it was somewhat important. The percentage of deputy minister respondents who said that it was somewhat important was the same for both their own work and for most, while the one-quarter assessing public opinion as being very

important for most had reported that public opinion was not very important for themselves.

Elected officials were split, with half (50%, n=1) saying that public opinion was somewhat important for most policy actors in limiting the range of options for policy-making and half (50%, n=1) saying that it was not very important. Ministerial assistants were also split, with half (50%, n=1) saying that it was very important and half (50%, n=1) saying that it was somewhat important.

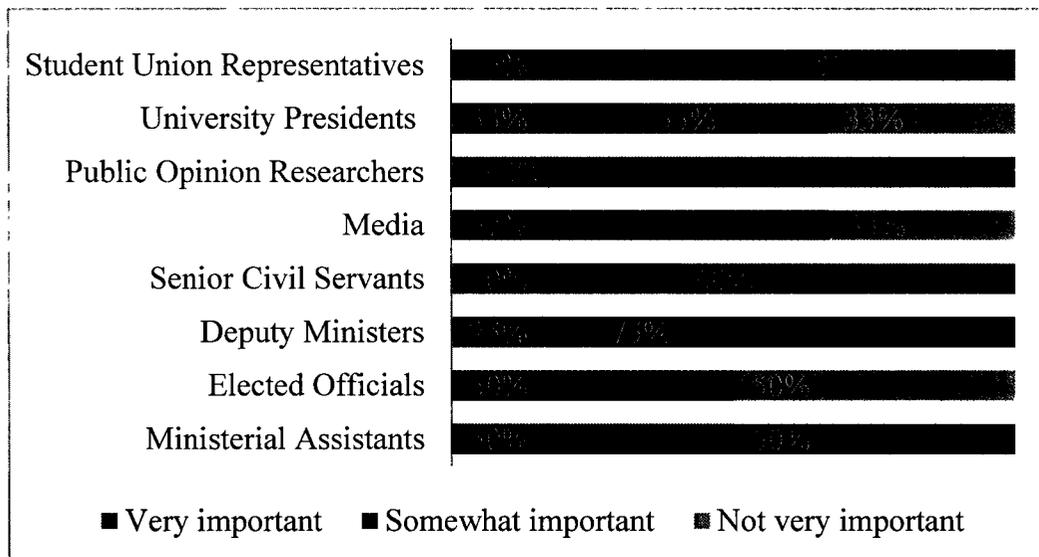


Figure B.8: Importance of Public Opinion in Limiting the Range of Options for Most by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

Student union representatives, university presidents, and senior civil servants assessed the importance of public opinion in limiting the range of opinions in policy-making for themselves in their work as having the same level of importance for most policy actors.

Shaping Communications around a Policy Decision

Policy Community Membership

Public opinion was deemed to be somewhat or very important for most of the policy community groups when shaping communications around a policy decision, as can be seen in Figure B.9. Ministerial assistants were unanimous (100%, n=2) in their assessments of public opinion being very important for shaping communications around decisions for them in their work. Elected officials were split, with half saying that public opinion was very important (50%, n=1) and half saying that public opinion was somewhat important (50%, n=1). Deputy ministers were also divided, with one-quarter (n=1) reporting that public opinion was very important for them in their work on shaping communications around decisions, and three-quarters (75%, n=3) saying that public opinion was somewhat important for them in this endeavour. Senior civil servants were quite divided, with 30% (n=3) saying that public opinion was very important for shaping communications around a policy decision, an additional 60% (n=6) saying that public opinion was somewhat important, and 10% (n=1) saying that it was not very important at all.

Interestingly, the media respondents were united in their responses, with all three (100%) saying that public opinion was not very important for shaping communications around a policy decision. This was a surprising response, but may in fact be reflective of how these respondents defined public opinion. It may also reflect their perceptions of who undertakes the “shaping” of communications, or the way that “shaping” is perceived. Public opinion researchers were split in their opinions on this,

with half (50%, n=1) saying that public opinion was very important and half (50%, n=1) that it was somewhat important for them in their work shaping communications. University presidents were evenly divided: 33% (n=1) said that public opinion was very important, 33% (n=1) that it was somewhat important, and 33% (n=1) that it was not very important. Student union representatives were also divided: 22% (n=2) said that public opinion was very important, 56% (n=5) said that it was somewhat important, and 22% (n=2) said that it was not very important for them in their work in shaping communications around policy decisions.

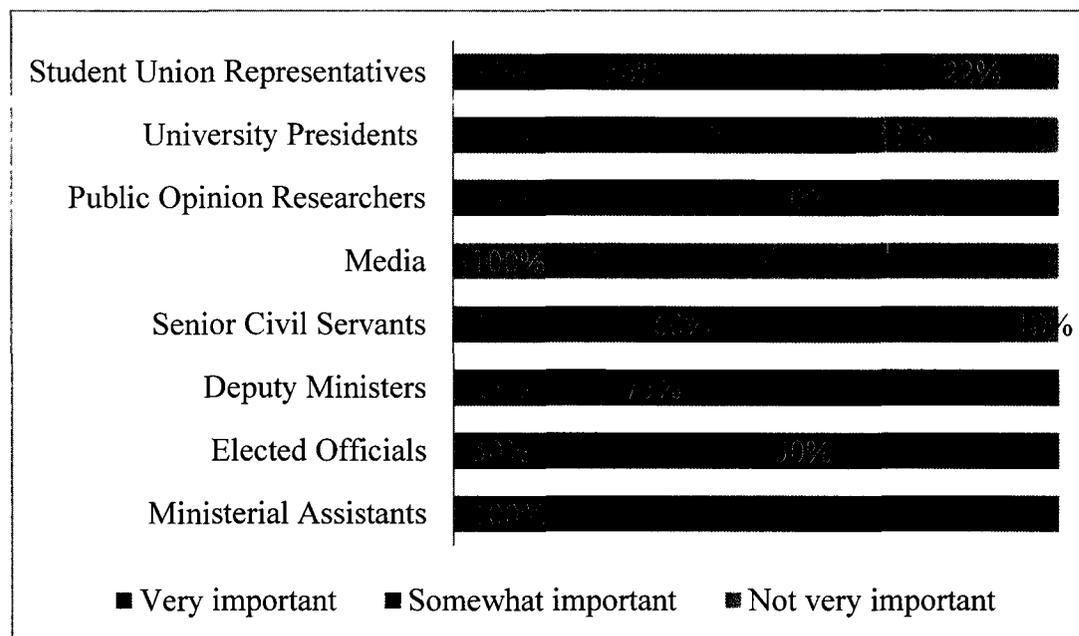


Figure B.9: Importance of Public Opinion in Shaping Communications around a Policy Decision for Respondents by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

For Most

There were some differences in how policy community groups assessed the importance of public opinion in shaping communications around a policy decision in their own work, and in the work of most policy actors, as can be seen in Figure B.10. However, only three of the five policy community groups said that public opinion would have a differing level of importance for others than for themselves: student union representatives, media, and senior civil servants.

Student union representatives were divided, with 33% (n=3) saying that public opinion was very important for most in this area, 56% (n=5) saying that it was somewhat important, and 11% (n=1) saying that it was not very important. Media respondents were divided, with half (n=1) saying that public opinion was somewhat important and the other half (n=1) saying that it was not very important for most policy actors in this policy area, when shaping communications around decisions. Senior civil servants were divided as well, with 40% (n=4) reporting that public opinion was very important for most, 40% (n=4) saying that it was somewhat important, and 20% (n=2) saying that it was not very important for most policy actors.

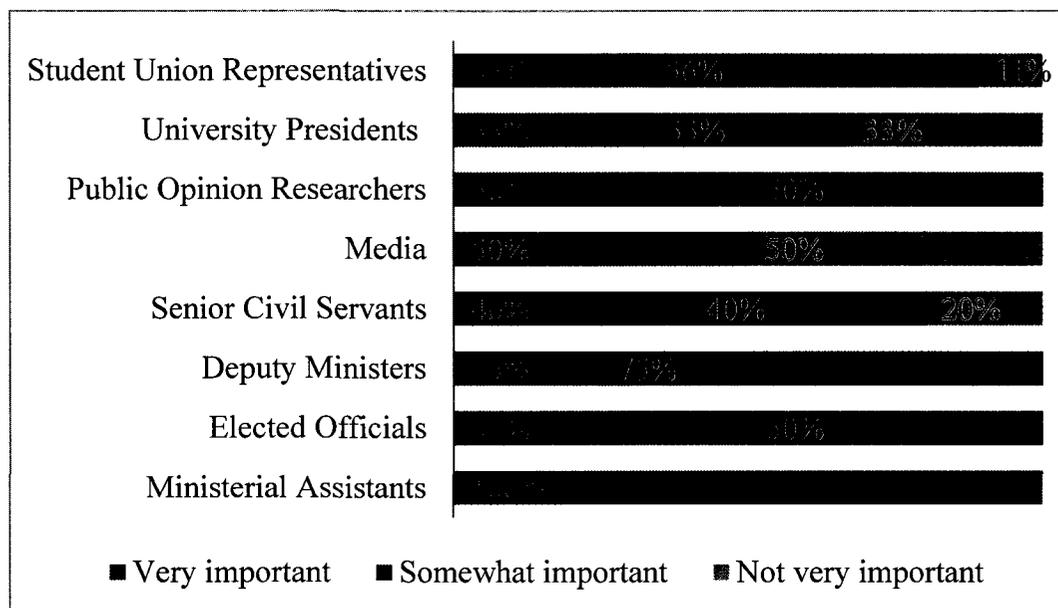


Figure B.10: Importance of Public Opinion in Shaping Communications around a Policy Decision for Most by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

University presidents, public opinion researchers, deputy ministers, elected officials, and ministerial assistants remained consistent in their assessment of how important public opinion was for most policy actors and for themselves in shaping communications around a policy decision.

Evaluating a Policy or Program

Policy Community Membership

This element of the policy cycle received the fewest number of responses, perhaps because of the little amount of evaluation work done on this area of higher education policy or perhaps because few of these respondents were directly involved in policy or program evaluation per se. There was little agreement on how important

public opinion was for evaluating a resulting policy or program, for respondents in the various policy community groups, as shown in Figure B.11.

Ministerial assistants were divided, with half saying that public opinion was very important (50%, n=1) for evaluating a resulting policy or program and half (n=1) saying that it was somewhat important. Elected officials agreed (100%, n=2) that public opinion was very important, while deputy ministers were divided: 33% (n=1) agreed that public opinion was very important, but 67% (n=2) said that it was somewhat important. Senior civil servants were also divided: 50% (n=2) said that public opinion was very important for them in evaluating a resulting policy or program, while 25% (n=1) said that it was somewhat important, and 25% (n=1) said that it was not very important for them.

Media respondents (100%, n=1) said that public opinion was not very important for them in doing policy or program evaluation. Public opinion researchers said that public opinion was somewhat important (100%, n=1) – an opinion that university presidents (100%, n=2) also expressed. No student union representatives addressed this question.

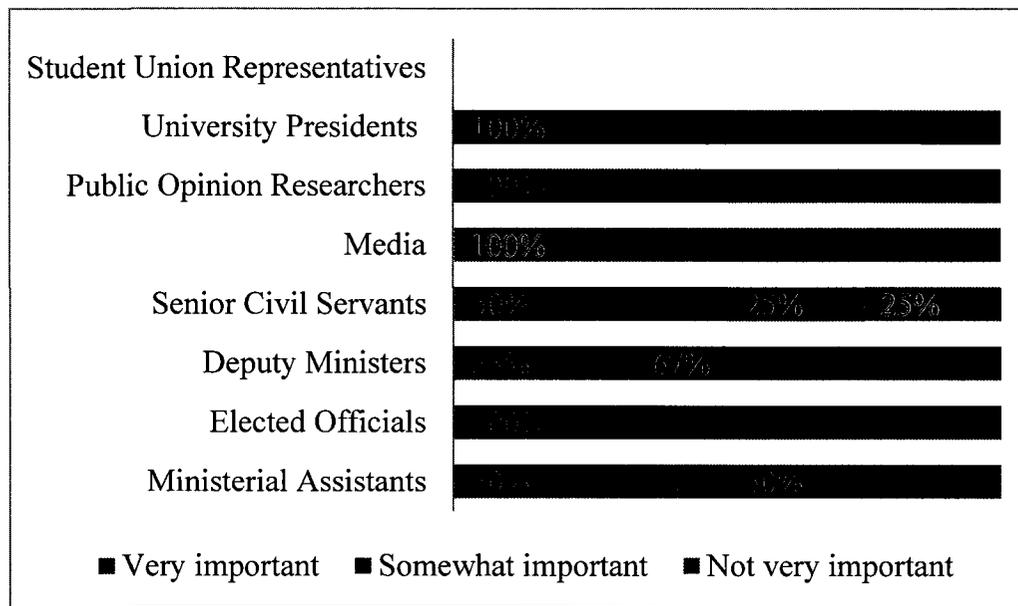


Figure B.11: Importance of Public Opinion in Evaluating a Policy or Program for Respondents by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)

For Most

There were some differences in terms of how policy community members thought about the importance of public opinion in evaluating a policy or program for most policy actors, rather than for themselves, as shown in Figure B.12. While a media respondent had said that it was not very important for themselves, they also said that it was very important for most policy actors (100%, n=1). Senior civil servants were divided evenly, with 33% (n=1) saying that public opinion was very important for most policy actors in evaluating a policy or program, while 33% (n=1) said that it was somewhat important and 33% (n=1) said that it was not very important. Ministerial assistants agreed (100%, n=2) that public opinion was somewhat important for most policy actors in evaluating a policy or program. University presidents, public opinion researchers, deputy ministers, and elected officials remained consistent in their

assessment of how important public opinion was for most policy actors and for themselves in evaluating a policy or program.

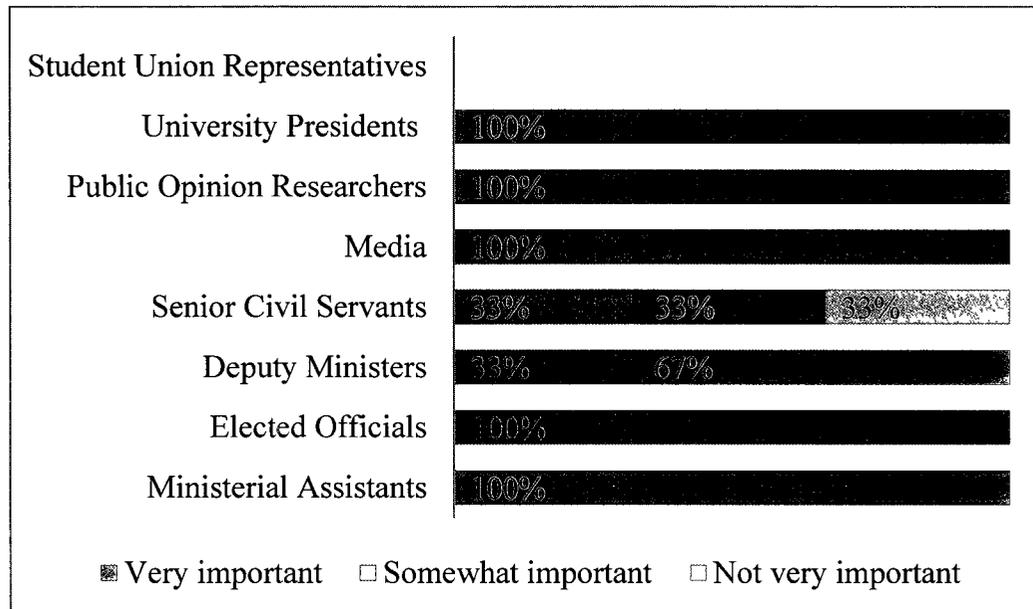


Figure B.12: Importance of Public Opinion in Evaluating a Policy or Program for Most Policy Actors by Policy Community Membership (% of respondents)