

**POLITICAL WILL:****What is it? How is it Measured?****May 2009****By Craig Charney**

To advocates, politicians, and organizations promoting change, “political will” is the holy grail. When advocates argue, politicians vote, and organizations campaign, they say they are trying to shape or respond to political will. Political will is the ghost in the machine of politics, the motive force that generates political action.

Yet for those who want to evaluate efforts to generate change – funders, government, and advocacy groups themselves – political will can seem like a will o’ the wisp. It’s hard to define, harder to grasp, and hardest of all to measure. In a recent paper, three academics took 32 pages just to offer a definition of political will! But without an idea of what it means and how it is observed, efforts to gauge the impact of advocacy can do little more than count leaflets distributed and phone calls made.

This article looks at political will from the perspective of a pollster and political scientist who works with politicians, non-profits, and officials involved in advocacy. It offers a simple definition of political will based on concepts from the fields I work in and suggests how each of those concepts can be measured. Then it shows how they can be put to work with real-world examples involving family values (the 1996 Clinton campaign and the passage of Proposition 8 in California in 2008) and support for international development aid.

Political will can be defined as the combination of three factors: *opinion* plus *intensity* plus *salience*.

Opinion begins with the simple fact of having one. Most Americans have an opinion of how Barack Obama is handling his job. Very few have an opinion on how Yousef Raza Gilani is handling his. (He happens to be the Prime Minister of nuclear-armed, Taliban-harried Pakistan.) There are lots of important people and issues on which most people have no opinion. That means no political will.

Opinion is also shaped by how issues are framed. Are we talking about giving drivers licenses to illegal immigrants who have no business being in our country? Or are we talking about preventing highway accidents and deaths by making sure

everyone on our roads has taken the drivers' test? The considerations that frame public opinion decide which way political will is pointing.

Intensity is the second factor in political will. On many issues, people have opinions, but they're not very strongly held. Coke or Pepsi? Delta or United? Do you really care that much? On others, the cognoscenti may be concerned, but the masses are not. Do something about global warming? Many people feel strongly about that. Via cap and trade? Ordinary folk will ask: Is that like Cap'n Crunch? If there's not much intensity, there's not much political will.

Yet even strong opinions form political will only if they're salient to public choice.

There's no political will if they have no connection to public affairs. In Manhattan, where I live, polling shows that East Siders prefer dogs, while West Siders tend to have cats. (And as a West Sider, I can confirm that these are strongly-held feelings!) But I don't think anyone believes this explains why East Siders are likelier to be Republicans and West Siders Democrats.

In other cases will is weak because issues, even if public, have not been politicized. Programs to promote preschool education or reduce drunk driving show very broad public support. Yet they are not very salient to voters or leaders when they make decisions, because they have not become fault lines of intense conflict. If support is a mile wide but an inch deep, political will is shallow.

So if political will = opinion + intensity + salience, how do you measure it? Since I am a pollster, I hope you will not be shocked if I tell you: through polls!

The simplest measure of opinion is the percentage of "don't knows" in the responses. The higher the don't knows, the less opinion there is. To determine the impact of framing, look at the consistency of opinion on a topic across different question wordings and different times. The more consistency, the more opinion.

The proof of intensity of opinion is polarization – people are at opposite poles. This can be measured in two ways – through multi-category questions ("very or somewhat in favor") or using multiple questions to create scales or indices.

Finally, salience can be observed both subjectively and objectively. Subjectively means asking people directly ("how important is it to you?") Objective measurement involves seeing the attitude's impact – how closely it connects to voting, legislative decisions, etc.

These measures allow us to evaluate political will – and therefore to assess how far advocacy efforts have succeeded and how they might build or use it.

For instance, let's look at "family values," a key battleground in the past decade. There is a well-known conservative families agenda (anti-abortion, anti-gay, and pro-traditional family). Opinion on this agenda is mixed, intensity of feeling is high, but

salience is high for relatively few (“one-issue voters” for whom an issue like abortion is a litmus test). There’s also a liberal families agenda, focused on education, health-care, and family-friendly workplace policies. This is one on which support is broad, intensity is high, but where – until fairly recently – salience was low for most voters.

After my polling helped reveal this, when I was part of President Clinton’s 1996 polling team, the campaign put liberal family values front and center. Ads spotlighting the president’s achievements on education, health care, and the Family and Medical Leave Act helped swing “soccer moms” into his camp. In this way, attitudes which had not been politicized before were turned into political will.

On the other hand, in California last year, in the successful campaign to ban gay marriage (Proposition 8), another sort of political will found an outlet. If opposition to gay marriage was widespread but salience was high to only a few, candidates could not win on that issue. But a referendum in a year when millions of black and Latino voters were brought to the polls by Barack Obama’s candidacy ironically was the ideal mechanism to allow their social conservatism to express itself in a vote against gay marriage. It lowered the bar required for political will to change the law.

Now take another issue: support for foreign aid. Attitudes on this issue often vary with the question: supportive of humanitarian assistance, doubtful on development aid. Information also dramatically affects views. Polls show that most Americans think as much as 40% of the Federal budget goes to foreign aid. So they want to cut it! Those aware of the real level of aid (1% of the budget) are much more supportive. Finally, even if people are supportive of aid, its salience is low, because neither party sees it as a vote- or contribution-winner. No wonder it’s hard to build support for it!

I’ll finish with a cautionary tale.

There once was a country where a very rich person gave a lot of money to advocate for foreign aid in an election year. Pollsters polled, consultants consulted, ad people advertised with this money. When they were done, people told pollsters and candidates said foreign aid was a good thing. So the pollsters, consultants, and ad people all said, “We’ve done very well indeed.”

There were just a couple of problems. One was that out of the millions of people who voted, nobody could find a single one who had actually voted on the basis of foreign aid. The other was that the No.2 official voted into office said that his No.1 promise for breaking was ... his promise to increase foreign aid.

Which country is this? I’ll let you guess. But the point of the story is: there’s no substitute for rigorously evaluating the political will that an advocacy campaign has generated with the tools I’ve described here: opinion + intensity + salience.

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