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2019 — the Year in (Interesting) Polling

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The results of Gallup’s presidential job-approval poll hovered between 37 percent and 46 percent throughout the year, with disapproval trending between 59 percent and 51 percent. And despite the rise of a couple of credible challengers, Joe Biden maintained his lead in the race for the Democratic nod to take on the incumbent.

But really, who cares?

The polls that reveal the most about Americans’ attitudes — and thus, where the nation might be heading — seldom get the media attention the horserace numbers do.

Take the Cato Institute’s Welfare, Work, and Wealth Survey, conducted in early March. It exposed the superficial appeal of populism. With both right and left pols and radio/TV gabbers regularly railing against “corporations” and “the rich,” 53 percent of respondents supported “raising top marginal tax rates to 70% on income above \$10 million,” and 61 percent wanted higher taxes on “families earning over \$200,000 annually.”

Good news for Tucker Carlson and Elizabeth Warren? Maybe not. Foes of class warfare can take solid solace in Cato’s findings that 69 percent believed that billionaires “earned their wealth by creating value for others like inventing new technologies or starting businesses that improve people’s lives,” and 65 percent agreed with the notion that “we are all better off when people get rich” because “they invest their money in new businesses that create jobs and new technology.”

In addition, skepticism about bureaucracy’s ability to solve socioeconomic ills is broad and deep. “Nearly three-fourths ... say that even if government were to ‘spend whatever is necessary’ to eliminate poverty, that it doesn’t ‘know enough’ about how to actually accomplish that.”

Wide disdain for the feds in particular was uncovered in a separate March survey. The Axios Harris Poll 100 ranked “the reputations of the most visible companies in the United States.” In a result that warms libertarians’ heart-cockles, “on an unaided basis, Americans (both progressives and conservatives) called out Uncle Sam Inc. as the least respected and trustworthy company in America.” (For-profit entities in D.C.’s undesirable neighborhood included Comcast, Goldman Sachs, Sears, Facebook, and Bank of America.)

What's more, "the traditional issues government was once expected to solve are now offered by Americans as invitations to business." Fifty-four percent of those polled "want companies to make an impact" on job-creation, with significant shares of the public favoring the private sector lending a hand on immigration, education, health care and the environment.

The forces of Unlimited Government got some encouraging data in October, when the Campaign for Free Speech released its polling on "just how vulnerable free speech protections are in the United States."

About half of the citizenry agreed that the "First Amendment goes too far in allowing hate speech in modern America and should be updated to reflect the cultural norms of today." Fifty-seven percent concurred with the statement: "The government should be able to take action against newspapers and TV stations that publish content that is biased, inflammatory or false."

Scary stuff for proponents of free expression — but in an era of tribalism, identity politics and Cancel Culture, perhaps not surprising.

If social media bears much of the responsibility for a disturbingly high amount of speech-restriction support, the Pew Research Center's April and October analyses of Twitter users are required reading. At a mere 22 percent of the population, adults who tweet aren't a large cohort. Furthermore, Twitterites "are younger, more likely to identify as Democrats, more highly educated and have higher incomes than U.S. adults overall." And "a small share of users produce the vast majority of content related to national politics."

Something to remember, the next time you access the tweeter-in-chief or an "outraged" snowflake, seeking to place your finger on the pulse of public sentiment. Twitter ≠ reality.

Finally, 2019's polls confirmed that hell-in-a-handbasketry is alive and thriving. For decades, Americans have judged their situation and prospects to be dandy, while estimating the country's condition and future to be dire. Nothing has changed.

A plurality told Pew that "over the next 30 years, the average ... family will see its standard of living" worsen. Nearly three-quarters are convinced that the "gap" between the rich and poor will grow. Yet at the same time, the "inaugural Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground survey," which asked the hoary right track/wrong track question, found overwhelmingly positive assessments for "your community" (69 percent) and "your personal life" (87 percent).

It's a golden era — for me and the people I know. For the Republic, the end is coming soon.

Happy New Year!