

Public Comments Re-Imagined:

How Online Surveys Can Improve Governance

Michael Cornfield
Associate Professor
November 7, 2014

The Graduate School
of Political Management

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

GWU's Graduate School of Political Management:

First and foremost master's program in applied politics:
How to win elections, enact policies, govern
communities, and resolve conflicts peaceably and
sensibly.

The Global Center for Political Engagement:

Research arm of GSPM.

Among our Academic Partners: **Universidad de Navarra**

A challenge for our times:

How can we draw upon ***digital/technological*** power –to compute, connect, store, and retrieve– so as to realign the Aristotelian balance of ***aristocratic (money, expertise)*** and ***democratic*** power requisite to a well-formed political system?

The Trouble with Public Comments: Democracy Theater is Not Enough

Public comments can call attention to issues and ideas, serve as catharsis for their speakers, and reaffirm the ideal of free speech.



Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), "Freedom of Speech," 1943. Oil on canvas, 45 3/4" x 35 1/2". Story illustration for "The Saturday Evening Post," February 20, 1943. Norman Rockwell Museum Collections. ©SEPS: Curtis Publishing, Indianapolis, IN.

But they provide inadequate input for decision-making.

A (Live) Case in Point: School Overcrowding in Arlington, Virginia, USA.

- World renowned for “Smart Growth” mass transit planning in second half of 20th century.
- Now suffering from a shortage of public school facilities as families move in to partake of the high quality of life.
- Activists, through their Civic Associations, campaign before the School Board on behalf of their neighborhoods.
- But the School Board and its staff hear only those activist reactions and demands, not from the entire citizenry.

A Solution.

The Online Survey.

Basic versions available free; sophisticated versions at low cost.

Now utilized by reputable polling organizations:
YouGov, Pew Research (in beta).

Of value to decision-makers as well as
prediction-seekers.

Virtues of the Online Survey for Political Decision-Making

- **Less time-pressure** on citizens to participate.
- **Rich media** present detailed questions and nuanced response options.
- **Low costs** make feasible **sequential surveys**, to allow both sponsors and respondents to learn from early results and track preference changes.
- Statistical techniques such as Conjoint Analysis **illuminate democratic priorities** when citizens asked to consider trade-offs and list priorities.

Example from an Online Survey.

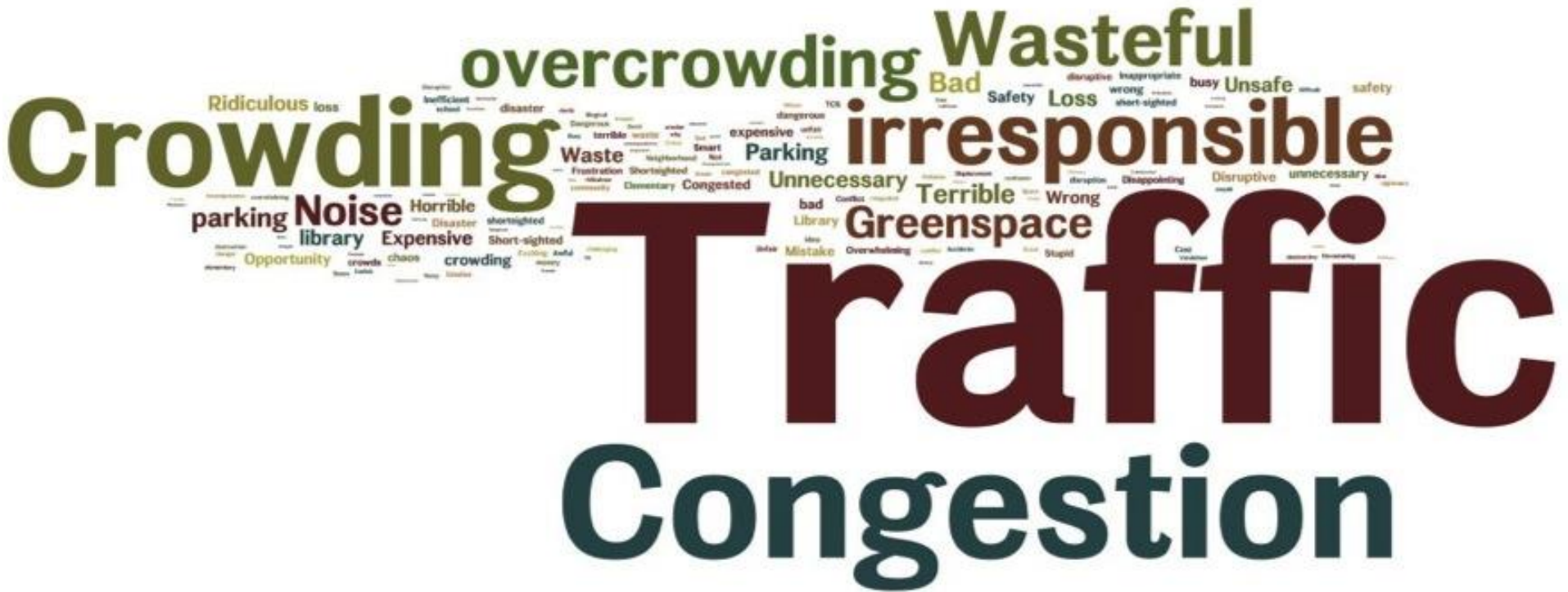
Rank your top 5 issues with 1 being most important to you and 5 being the fifth most important:

- Maintaining greenspace that can be used by the community (e.g., sledding, picnics, playgrounds)
- Maintaining greenspace that can be used for Arlington county recreational needs (e.g., soccer, baseball, etc.)
- Minimizing personal vehicular traffic Monday – Friday
- Minimizing personal vehicular traffic Saturday and Sunday
- Having a walkable neighborhood elementary school
- Ability for homeowners to use their on-street parking in front of their homes
- Maintain a community library
- Maintain a Sunday farmer's market
- Minimize additional bus traffic
- Maintain/improve pedestrian safety
- Maintain existing programs and services at the Reed Site (e.g., Integration Station)
- Minimize additional noise and/or light pollution
- Fiscal responsibility across a broad set of investment possibilities
- Recognizing that Swanson has almost no green space on its property (1 soccer field)
- Other

9. What three Single words come to mind when you think of the possibility of HB Woodlawn moving to the Reed School Site? Write ONE word in each blank.

Word One:

What are words that come to mind?



From results of an Arlington Civic Association poll, October 2014.

A (pre-digital) model: Envision Utah (USA).

In late 1990s, a public-private consortium campaigned to develop a plan so the state could accommodate 1M more residents in the first twenty years of the 21st century. (Utah population in 2000: 2.2M; 2010: 2.8M –up 26%, 3rd fastest in US.)

1. Surveys.
2. Scenarios.
3. Plebiscite.
4. Follow-up surveys.
5. Civic training sessions on use of planning tools.
6. Local governments and real estate developers targeted as allies.
7. Counties adopted plans.

Source: Xavier de Souza Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving* (MIT Press 2008).

Thank You.

CONCLUSION:

Surveys are not just for predictions.

Digital surveys can be deployed to create a dialogue between experts and citizens that can inform political decision-making and build popular support for the outcome.

Michael Cornfield

corn@gwu.edu

www.gspm.gwu.edu