

Opinion Research Frontiers

A presentation to the Public Affairs Association of Canada
January 25, 2005
Sutton Place Hotel

Our goal today

- **To explore new frontiers in opinion research by:**
 - **Reviewing what public opinion is, how it forms and changes.**
 - **Exploring issues in measurement**
 - **Exploring issues in sampling**

Defining public opinion

- **Basic definition**
 - “Those opinions held by private persons which governments find prudent to heed.”
- **Latent opinion**
 - ... what he (the legislator) needs really to worry about is, not whether his performance pleases the constituency at the moment, but what the response of his constituency will be in the next campaign when persons aggrieved by his position attack his record.”

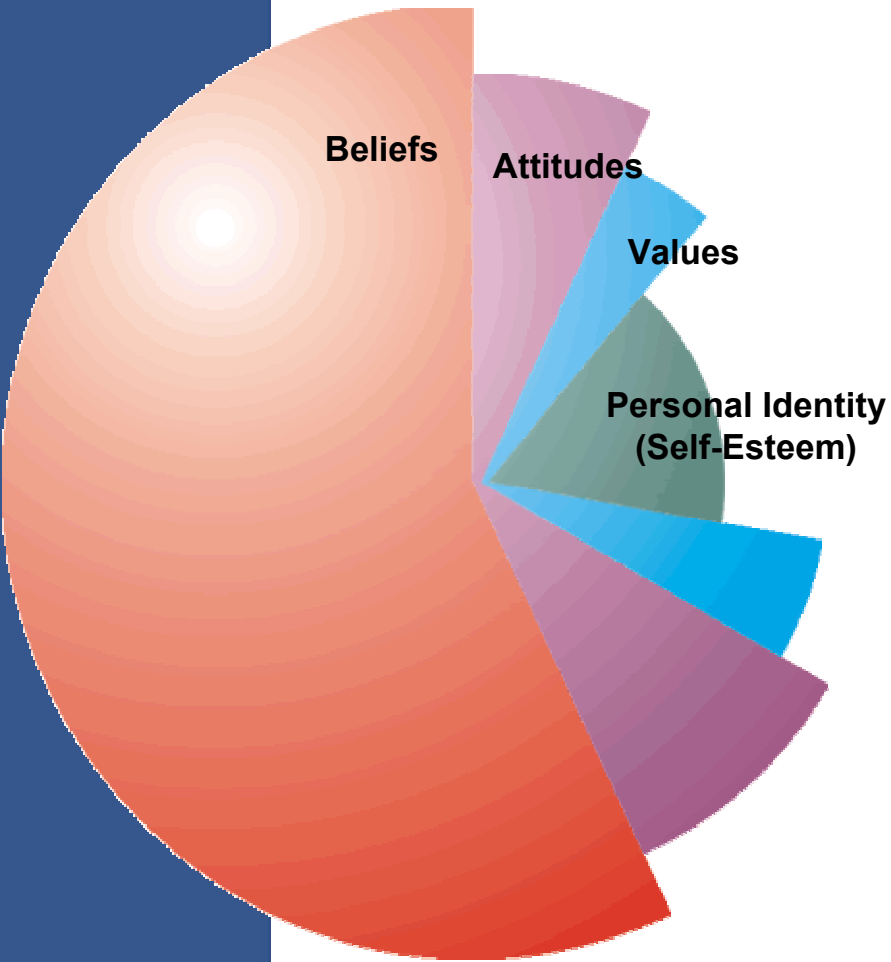
Challenges

- **How can we make sure we find real opinions?**
- **How can we be sure we have the right people in this age of declining participation?**
 - **Sampling**
 - **Types of people**

Finding Answers

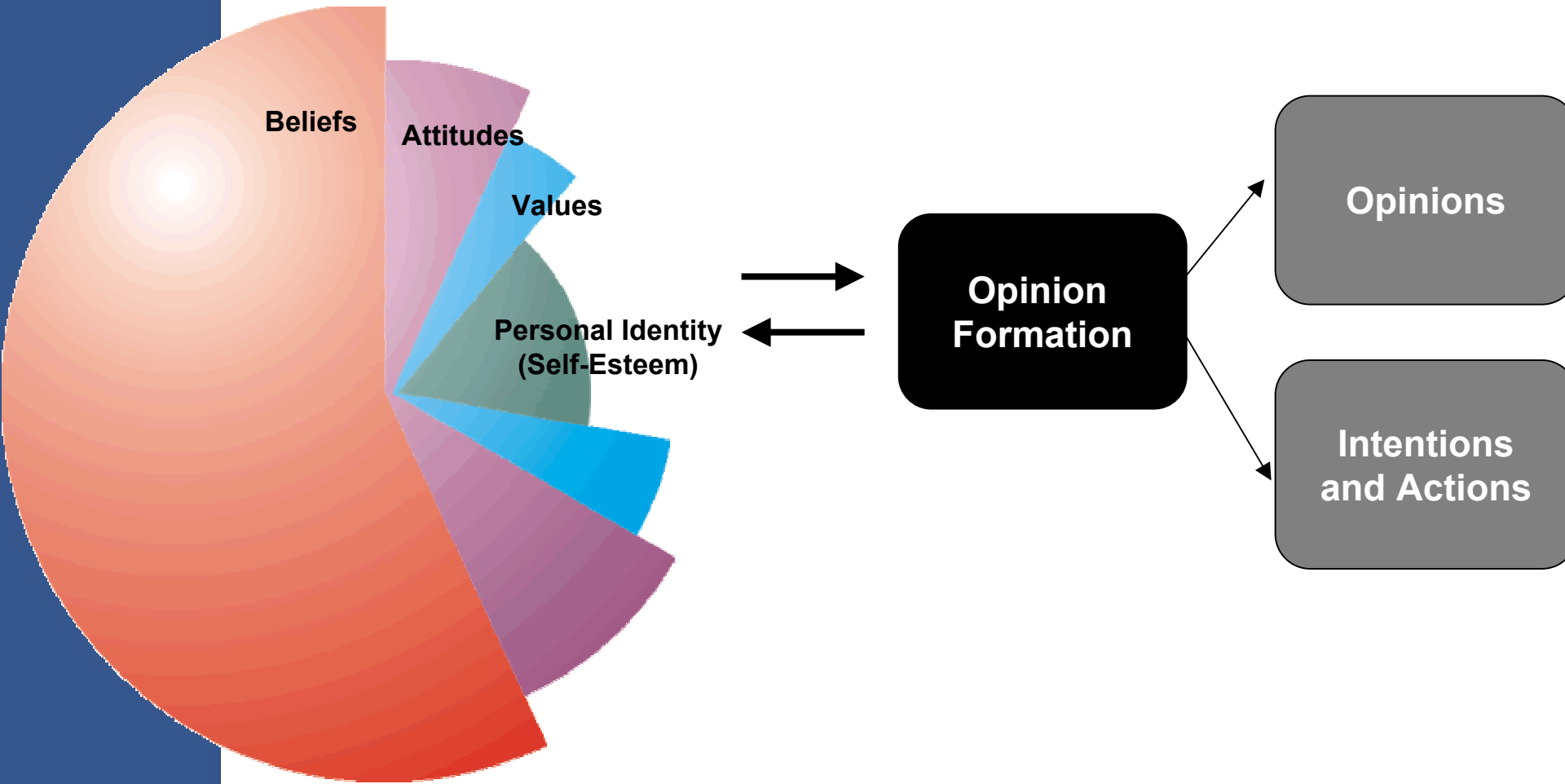
- **To find answers, you need a road map.**
- **Our point of view best summed up by John Zaller in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.**

The Belief System



- Beliefs: Something people think they know
- Attitudes: Emotions about how we feel about things other than our personal identity
- Values: What ought to be
- Personal Identity: Who people perceive themselves to be (linked to self-esteem)

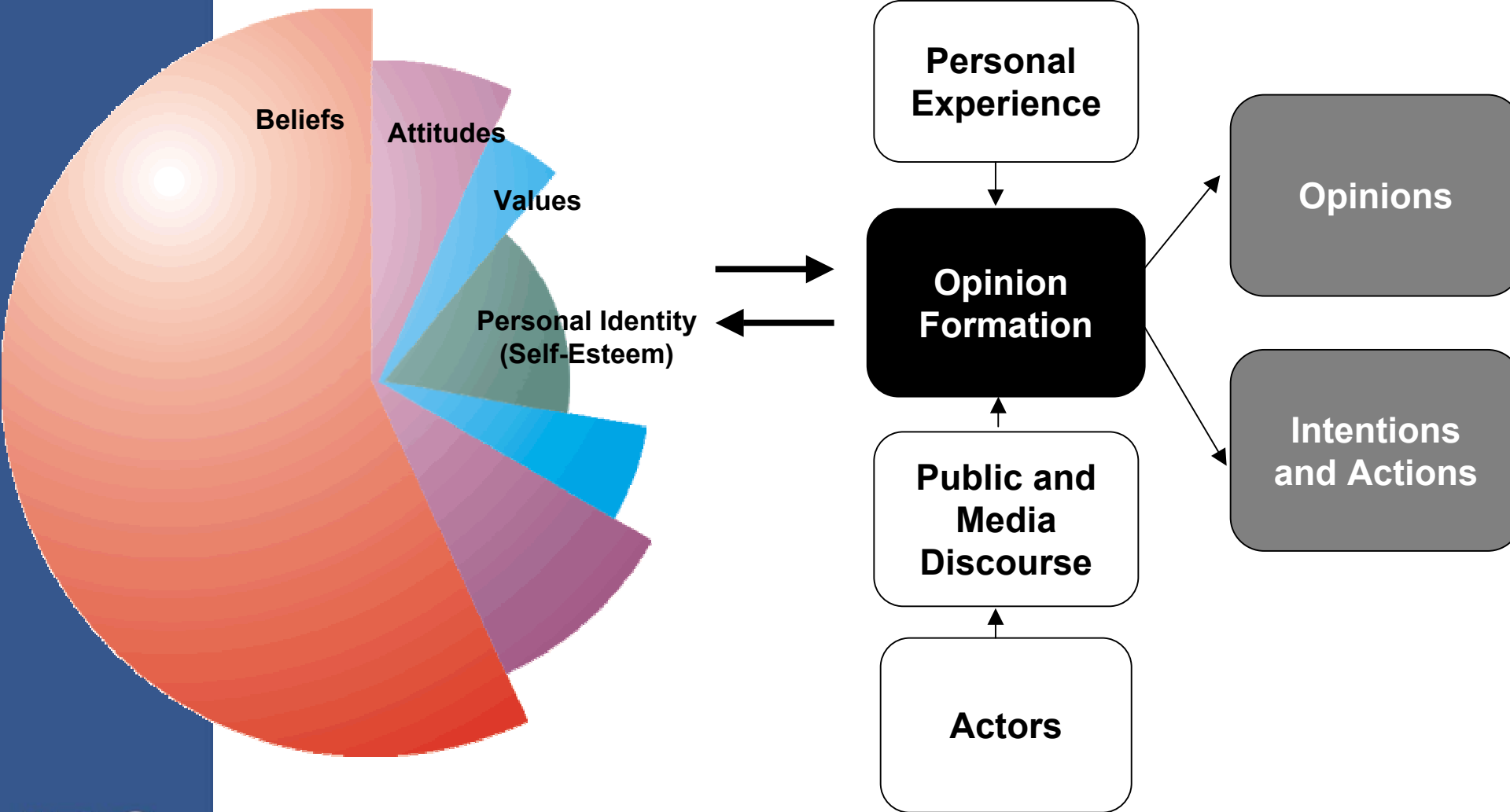
The Belief System



Key Elements of Opinion Formation

- **The Foundations:**
 - Personal values and beliefs and the social characteristics that influence them
- **A Topic Specific Belief System**
 - What do we believe to be true in a given area
- **The World Outside Our Heads**
 - What do we read, see or hear about a topic, or directly experience ourselves
- **Our Thought Process**
 - Different people think differently
 - Sometimes the same people think differently at different times or about different things

The Belief System

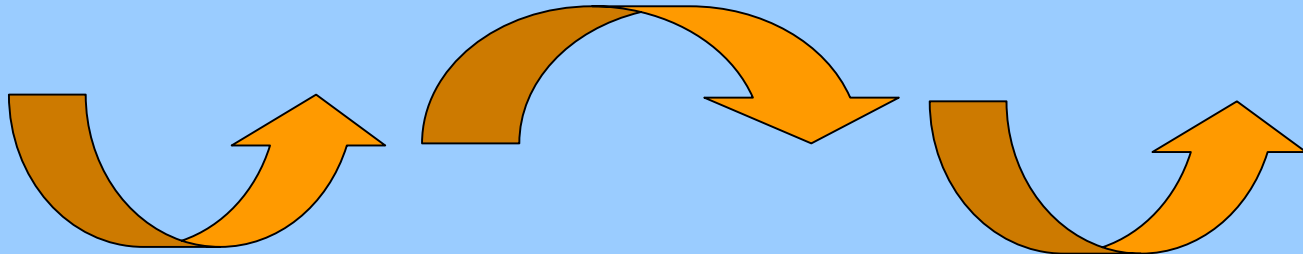


What is public opinion?

... and it's affected by the winds
* of Public Debate

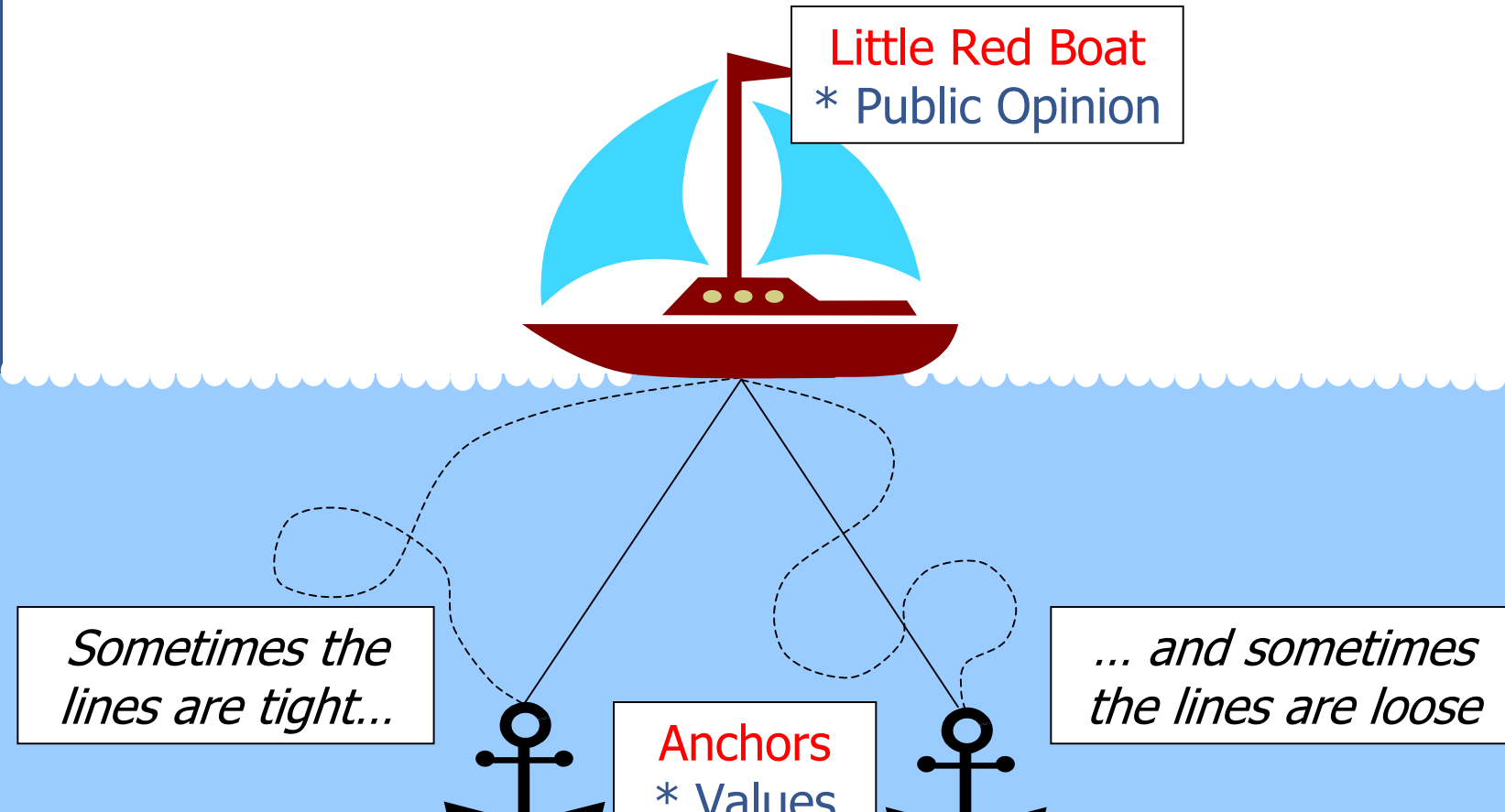


Little Red Boat
* Public Opinion



... and the current
* of Underlying Change

What keeps public opinion anchored?



When lake water is low ...

... values are loose and
the **Little Red Boat**
drifts around the lake

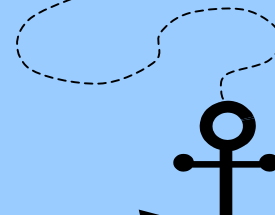
High Political
Sophistication



Little Red Boat
* Public Opinion

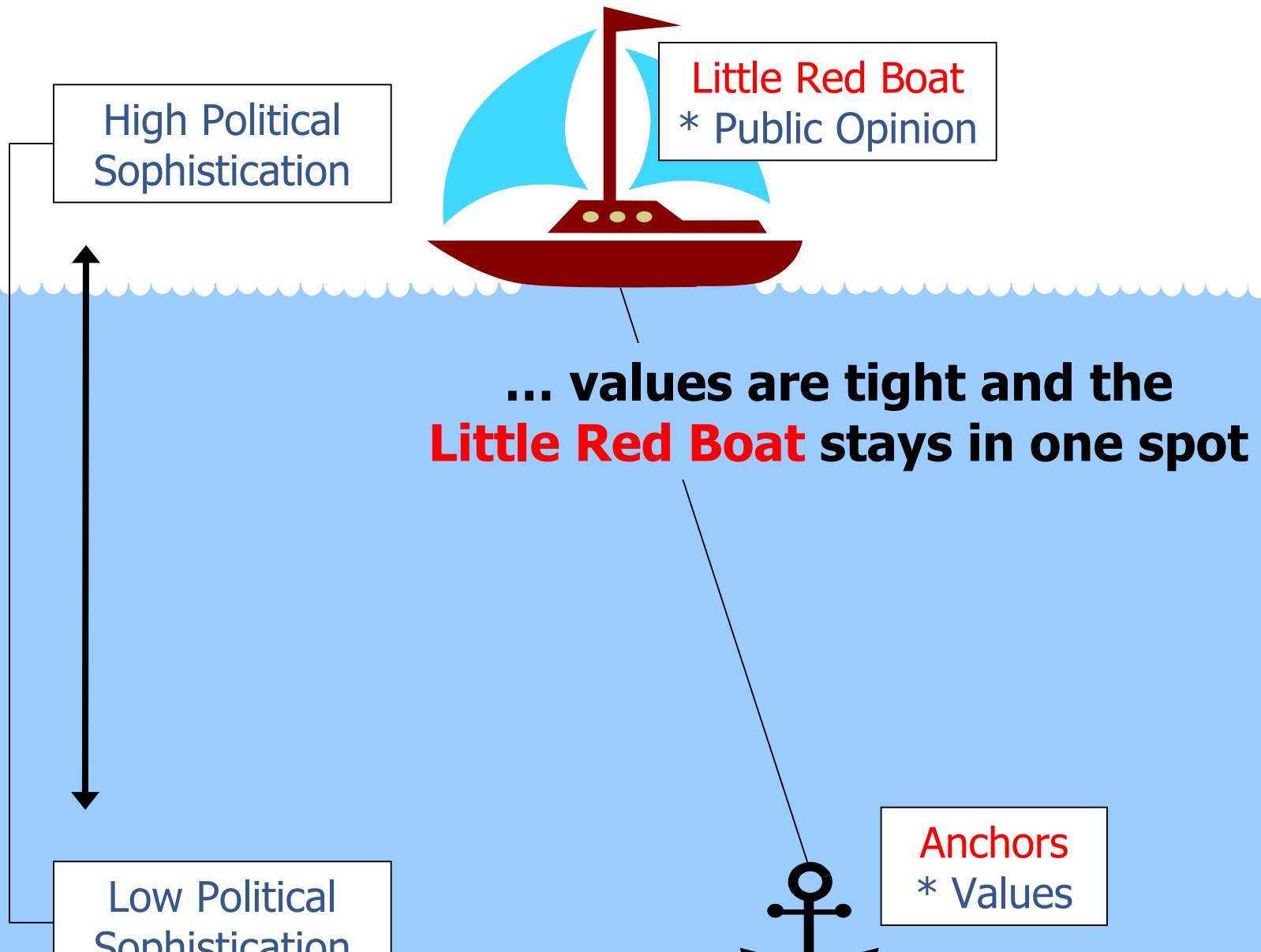


Anchors
* Values



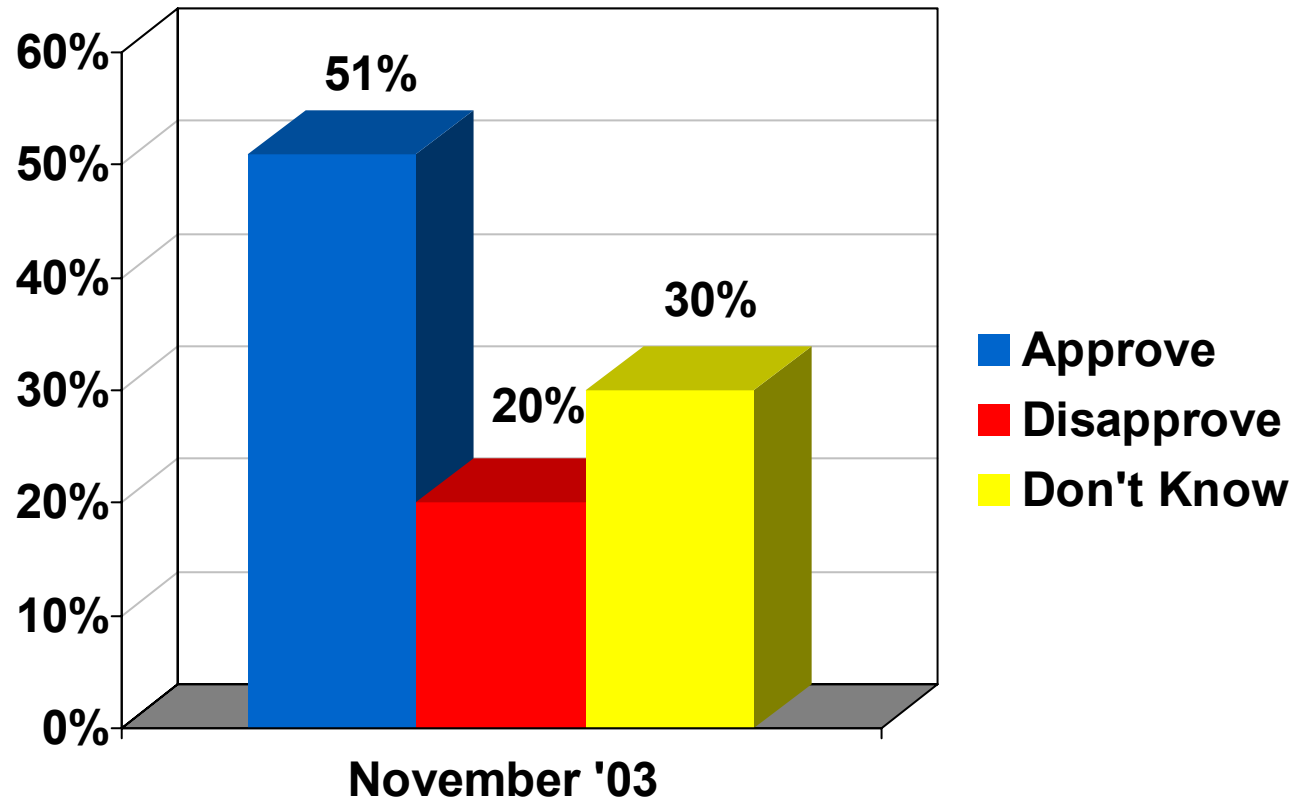
Low Political
Sophistication

... but, when lake water is high ...

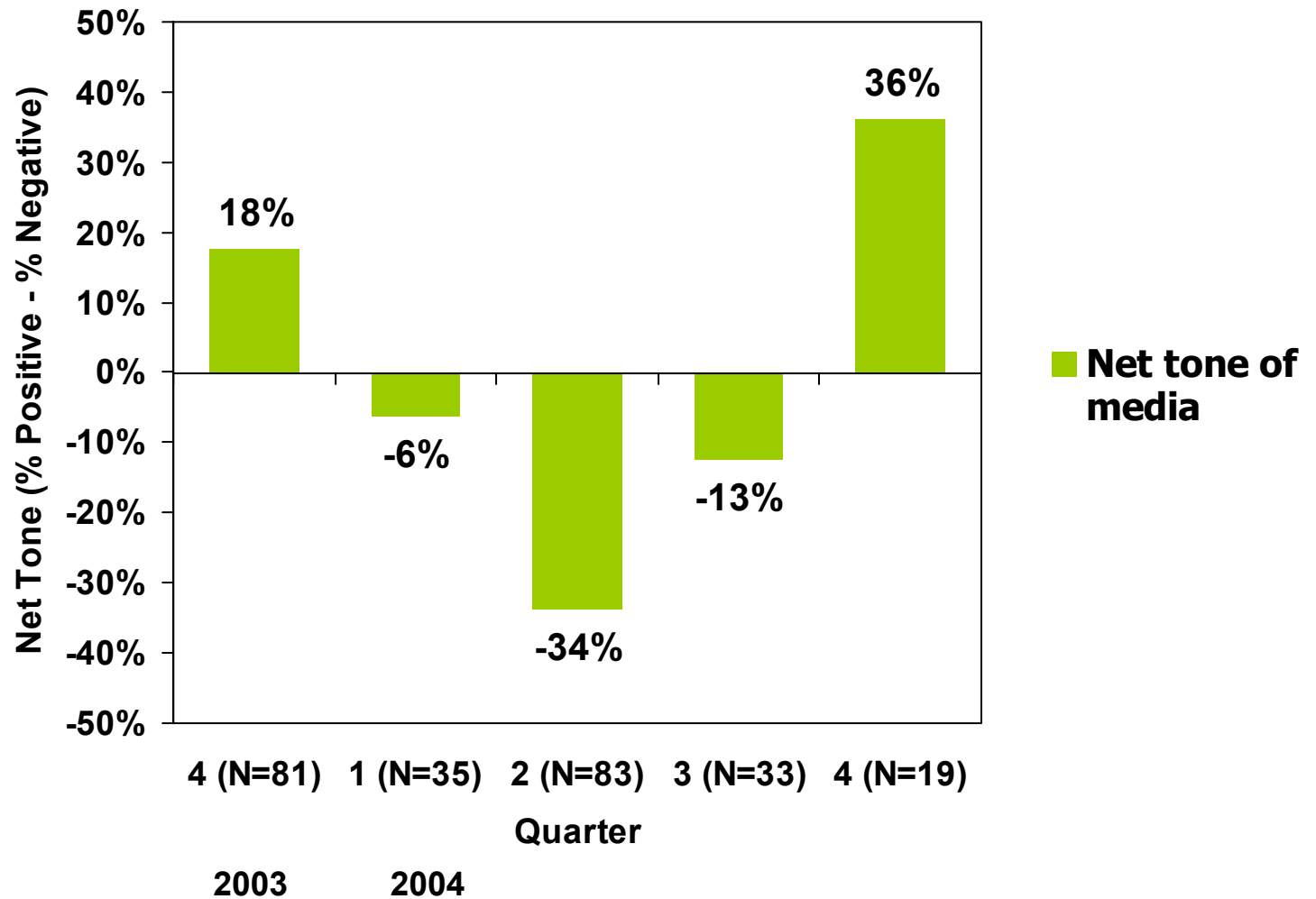


The Boats

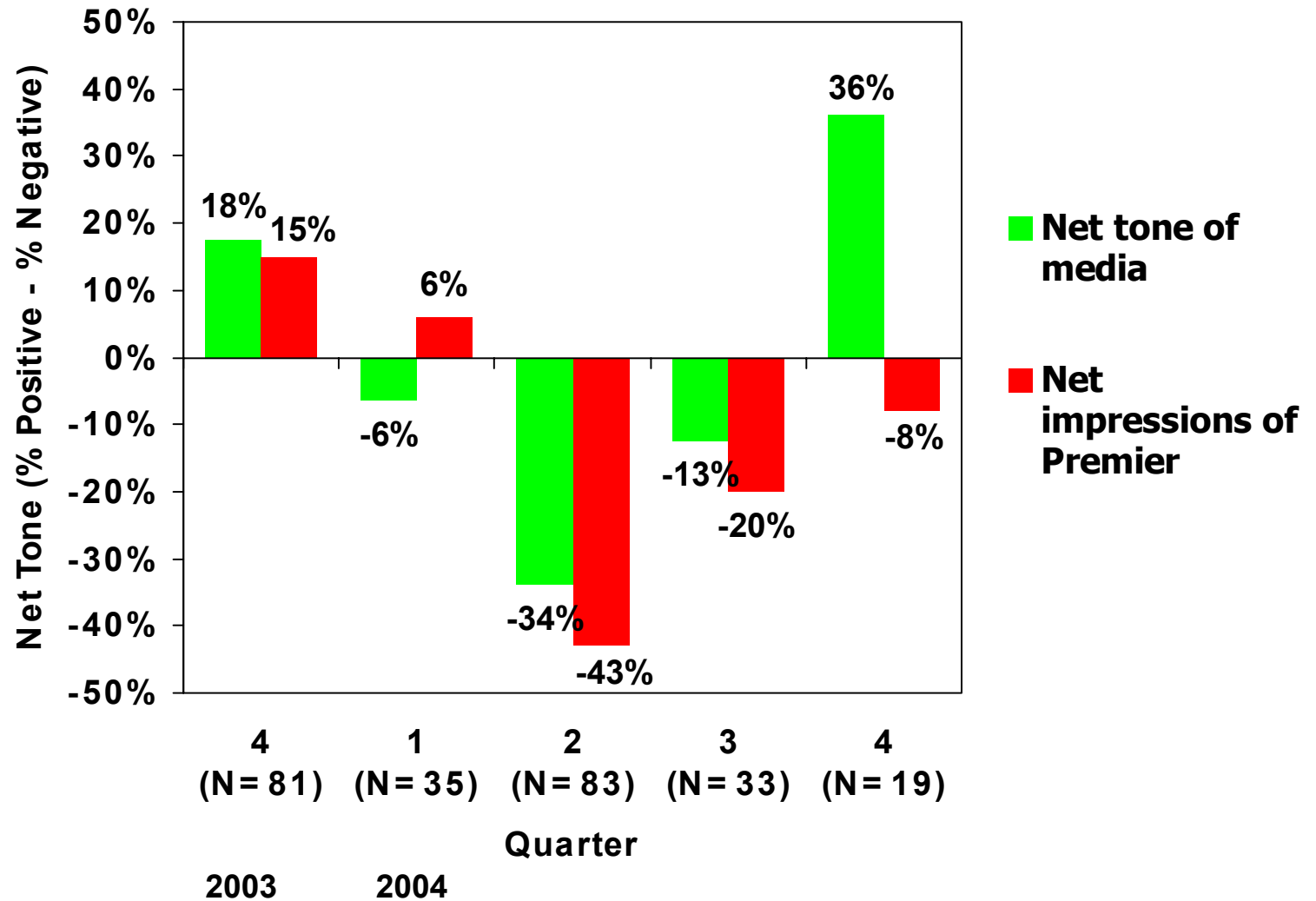
Now thinking specifically about Dalton McGuinty for a moment, the Liberal leader and the new Premier of Ontario - Do you approve or disapprove of the way Dalton McGuinty is handling his job as Premier? And do you feel strongly or just somewhat strongly about that?



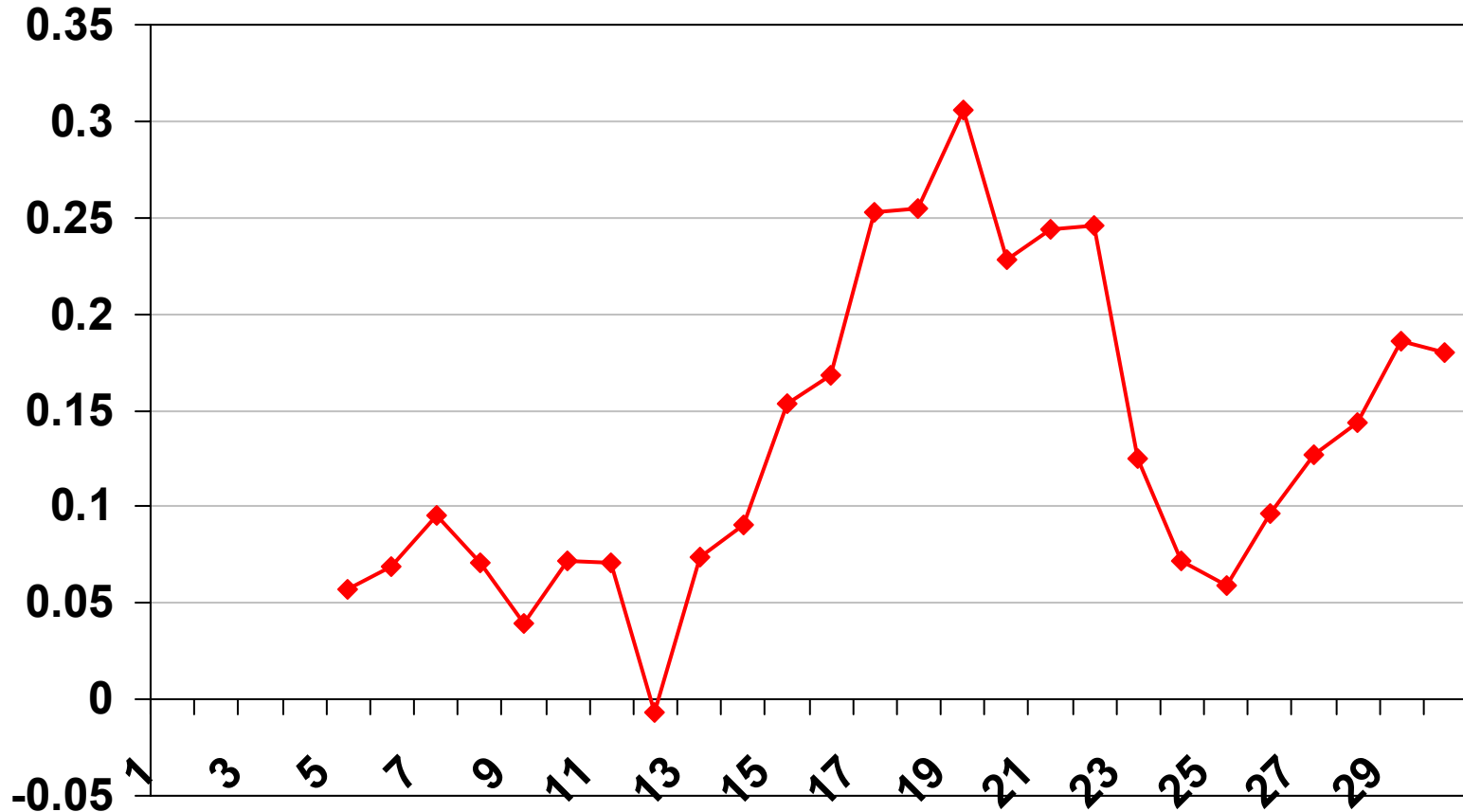
The Wind: Direction 1



The Wind: Direction 2

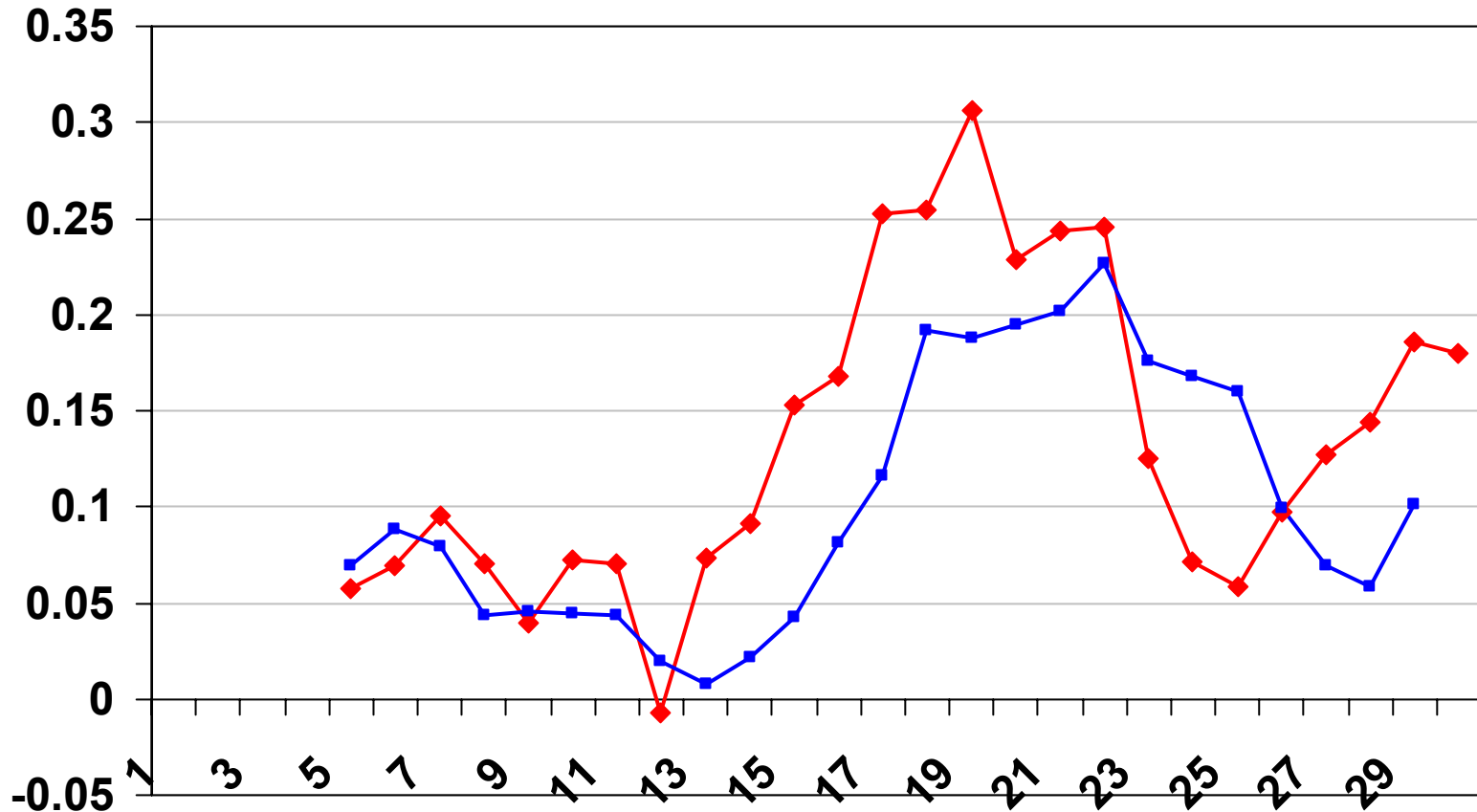


The Wind: Connection 1



◆ Liberal-PC Issue Coverage Gap, 5-day average

The Wind: Connection 2

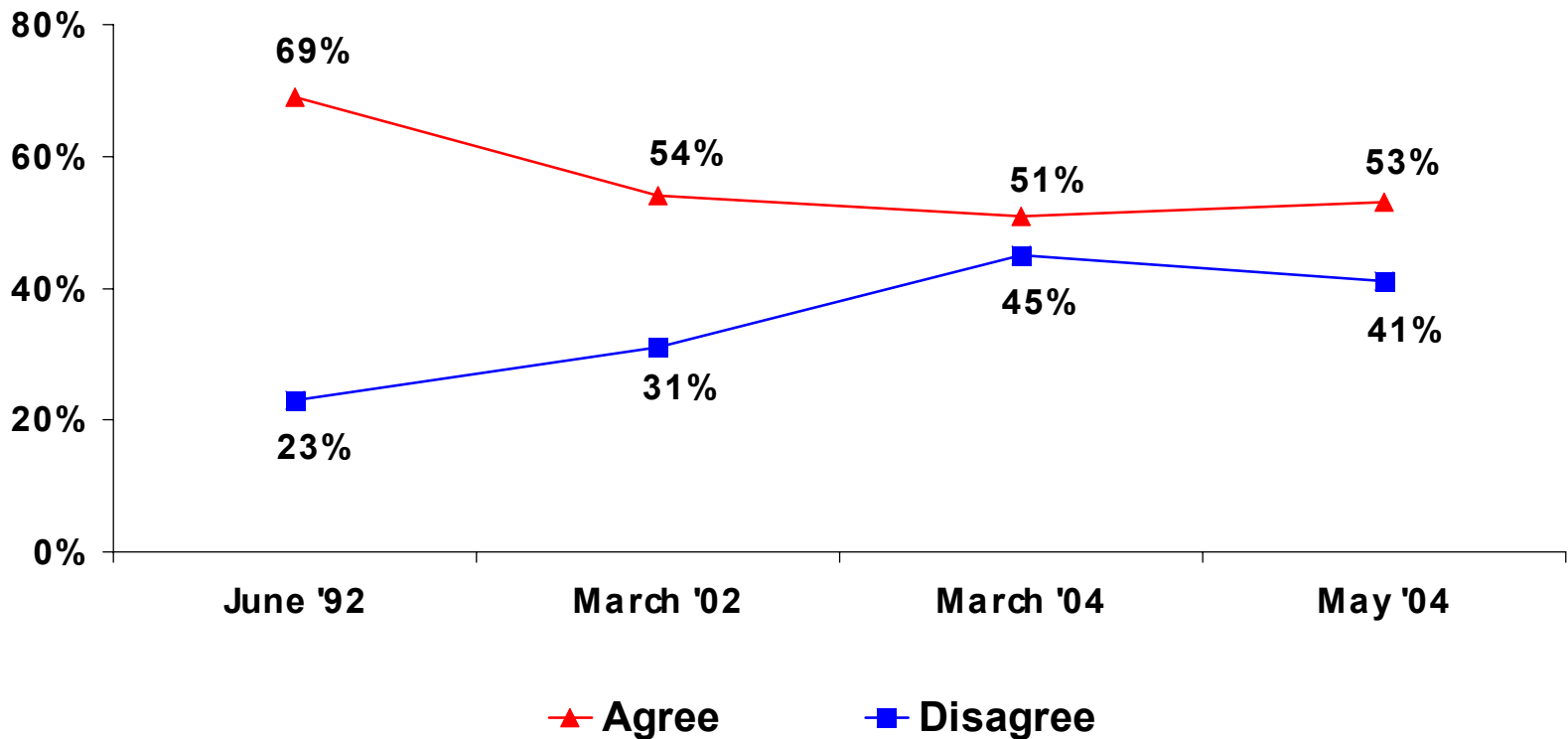


- ◆ Liberal-PC Issue Coverage Gap, 5-day average
- Liberal-PC Vote Gap, 5-day average

Currents

I am now going to read you a series of statements. For each statement, please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree.

Free enterprise with as little government interference as possible is the only way to ensure our future prosperity.

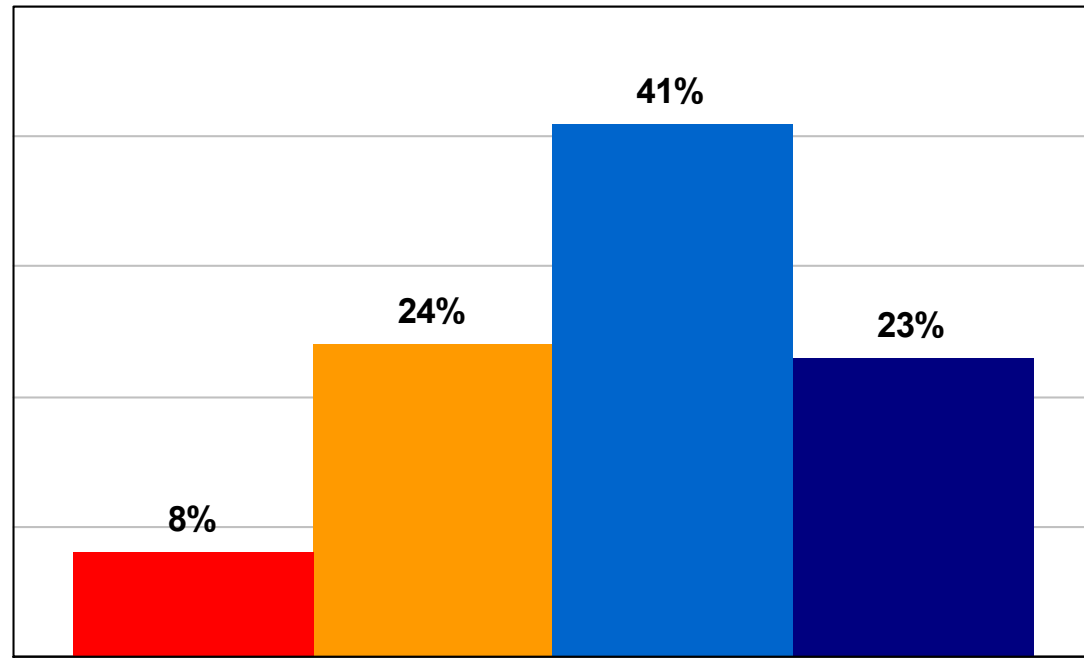


Note: Neutral/Don't know/Refused not shown

Another Boat

Now, I'm going to read you various statements about healthcare. For each one, I'd like you to tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree? The first/ next statement is ...

Government should cover rising health care costs by significantly increasing spending.

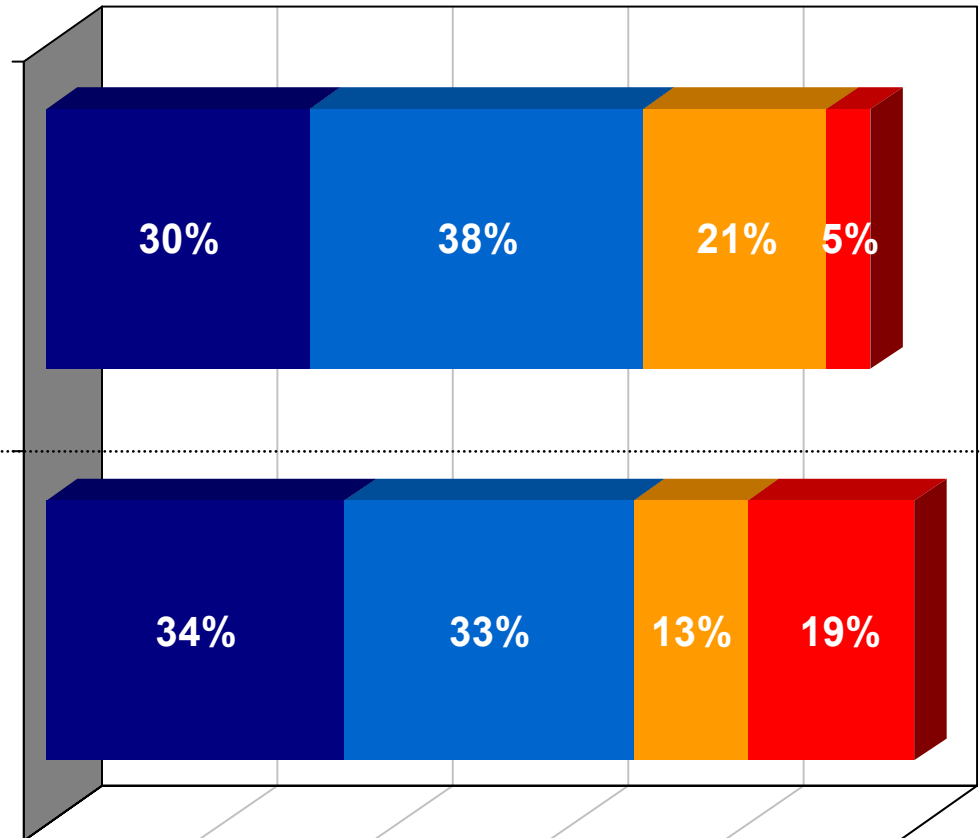


■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree
■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Conflicting Anchors

Now, I'm going to read you various statements about healthcare. For each one, I'd like you to tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree? The first/ next statement is

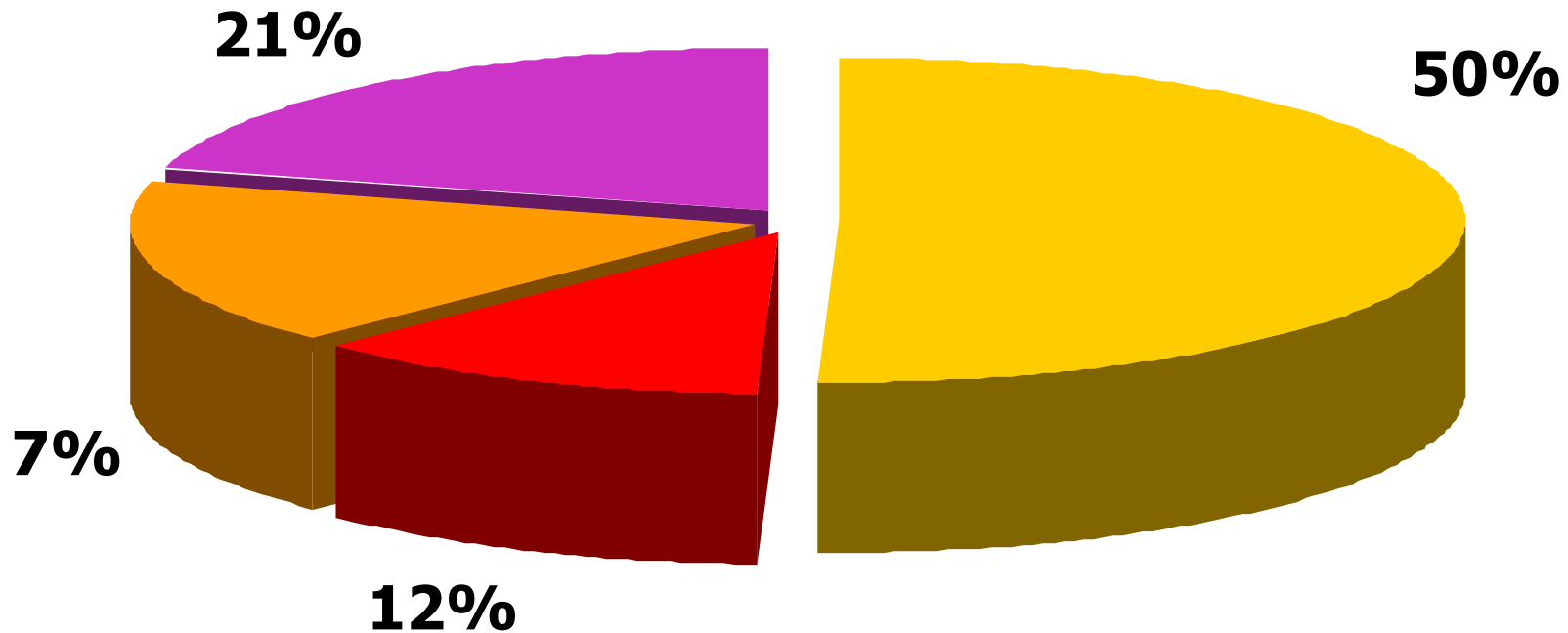
The costs of Medicare are skyrocketing out of control.



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree
■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Note: 'Don't know / No response' not shown

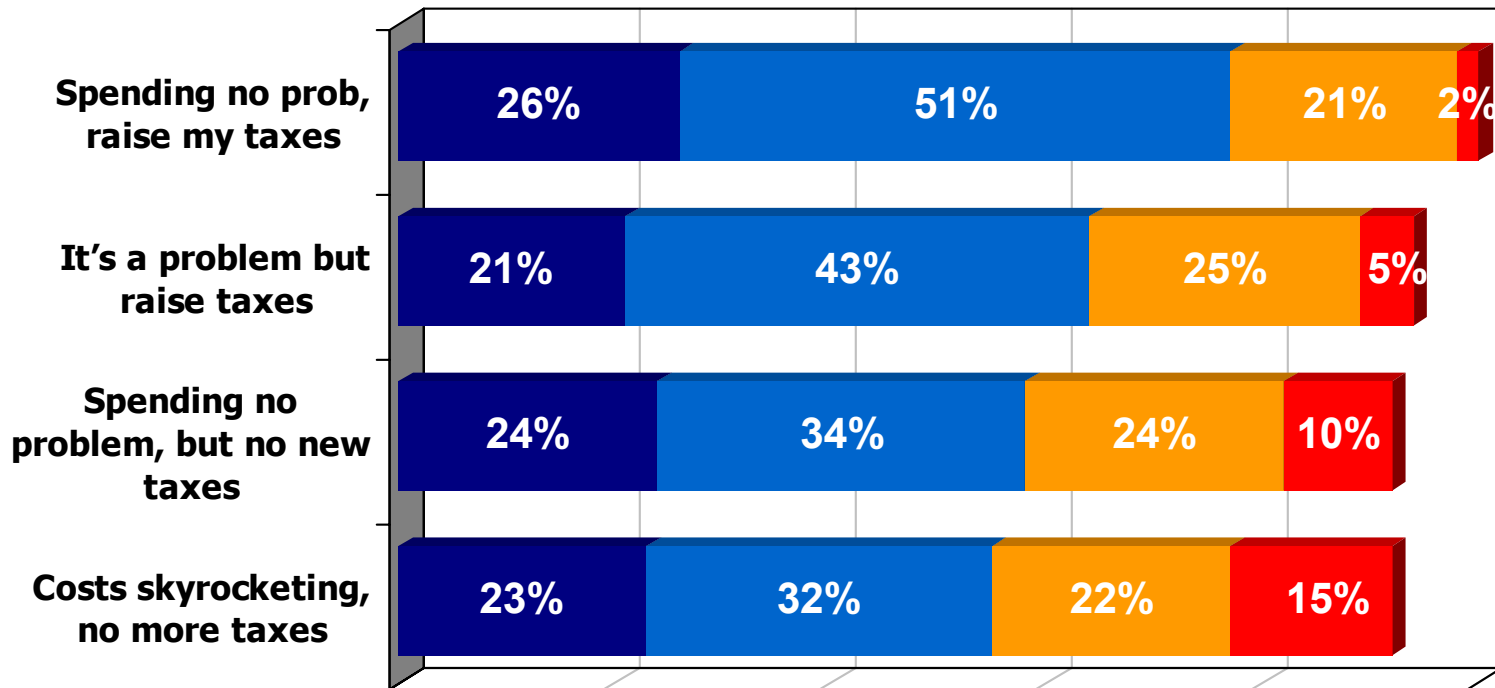
Spending Segments



- It's a problem but raise taxes
- Spending no problem, but no new taxes
- Spending no prob, raise my taxes
- Costs skyrocketing, no more taxes

The Impact of Conflicting Anchors

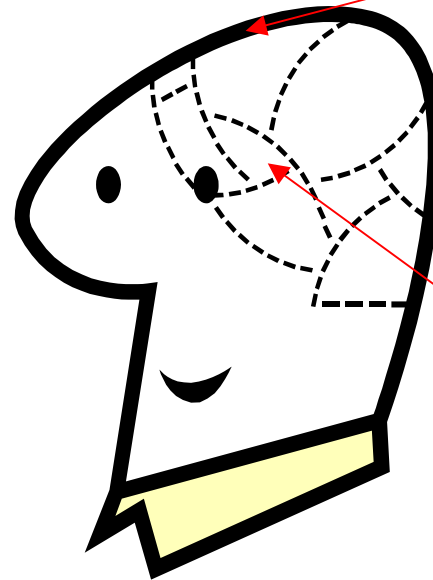
Government should cover rising health care costs by significantly increasing spending by Spending Segments.



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree
■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Note: 'Don't know / No response' not shown

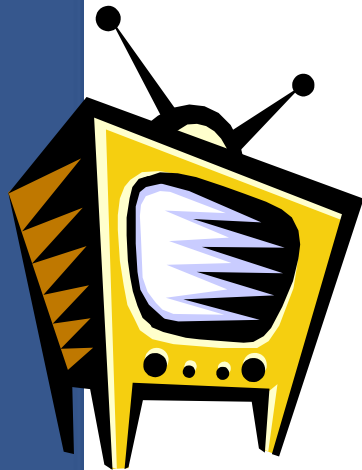
Building Opinions



Feeling



Thinking





IRG

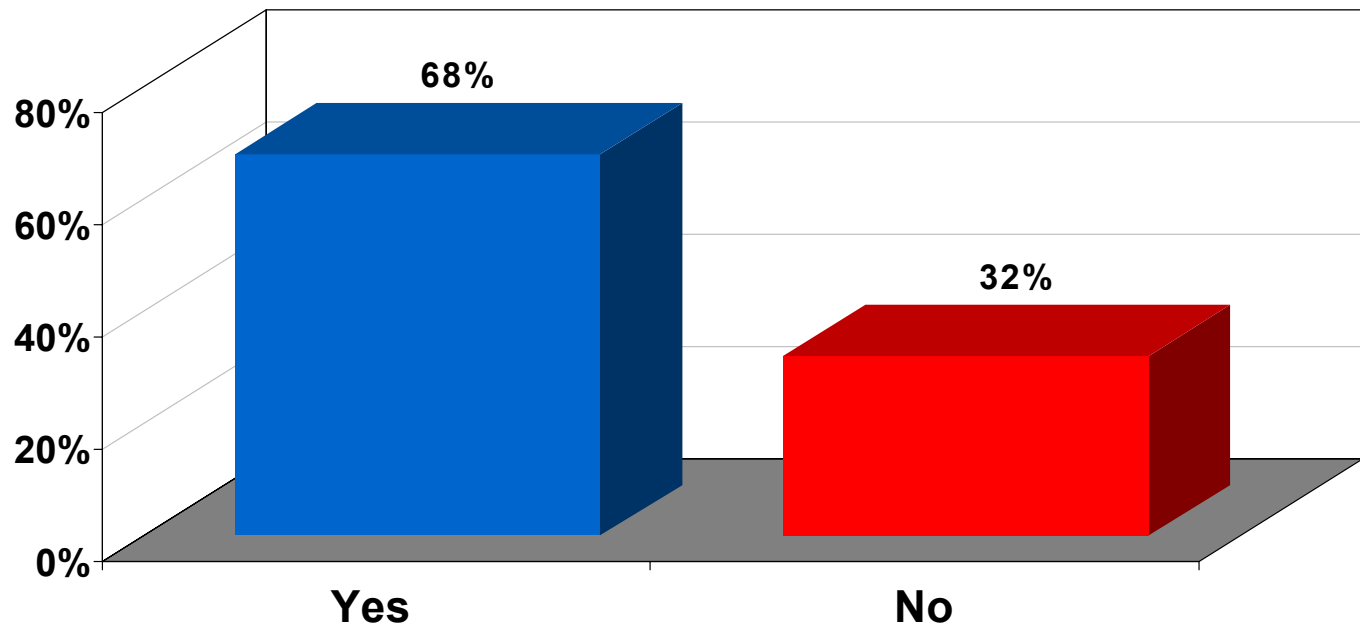
What our model tells us

- **Bernard has two conflicting anchors on National service.**
- **The survey 'constructs' his opinion by emphasizing one anchor over the other.**
- **Just like the impact of media content in the last election.**
- **What are some rules to help us guard against this?**

Start by assessing the 'salience' of an issue

Have you read, seen, or heard anything about the controversy involving the federal government Immigration Minister Judy Sgro and the issue of a government program to allow foreign exotic dancers in because of a shortage of exotic dancers here in Canada?
(December 2004)

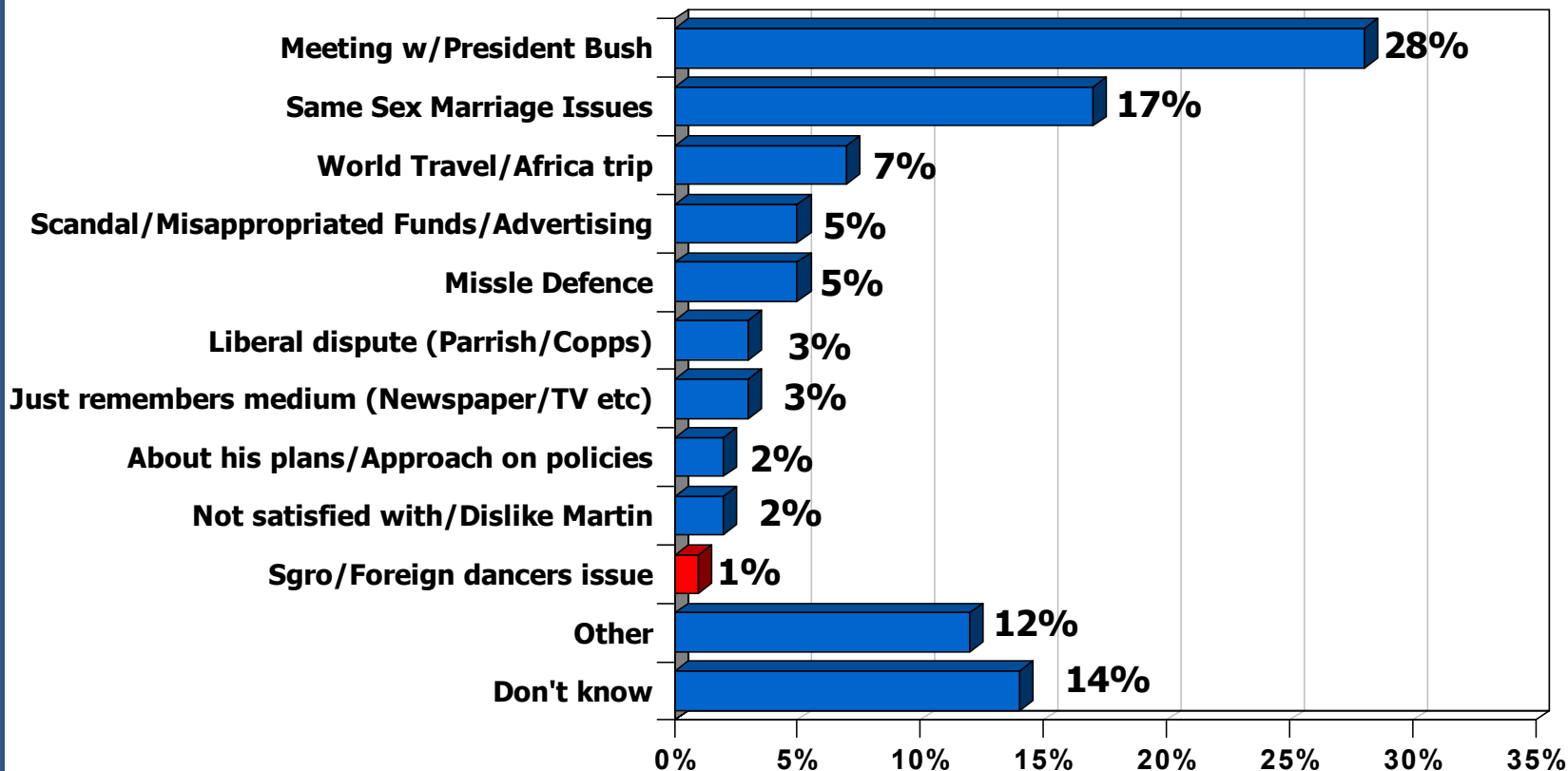
- Is the public aware of an issue?
- Have they talked about the issue in the past week, past month?



Try and put the issue in context

What was it that you read, saw or heard about Paul Martin?
(December 2004)

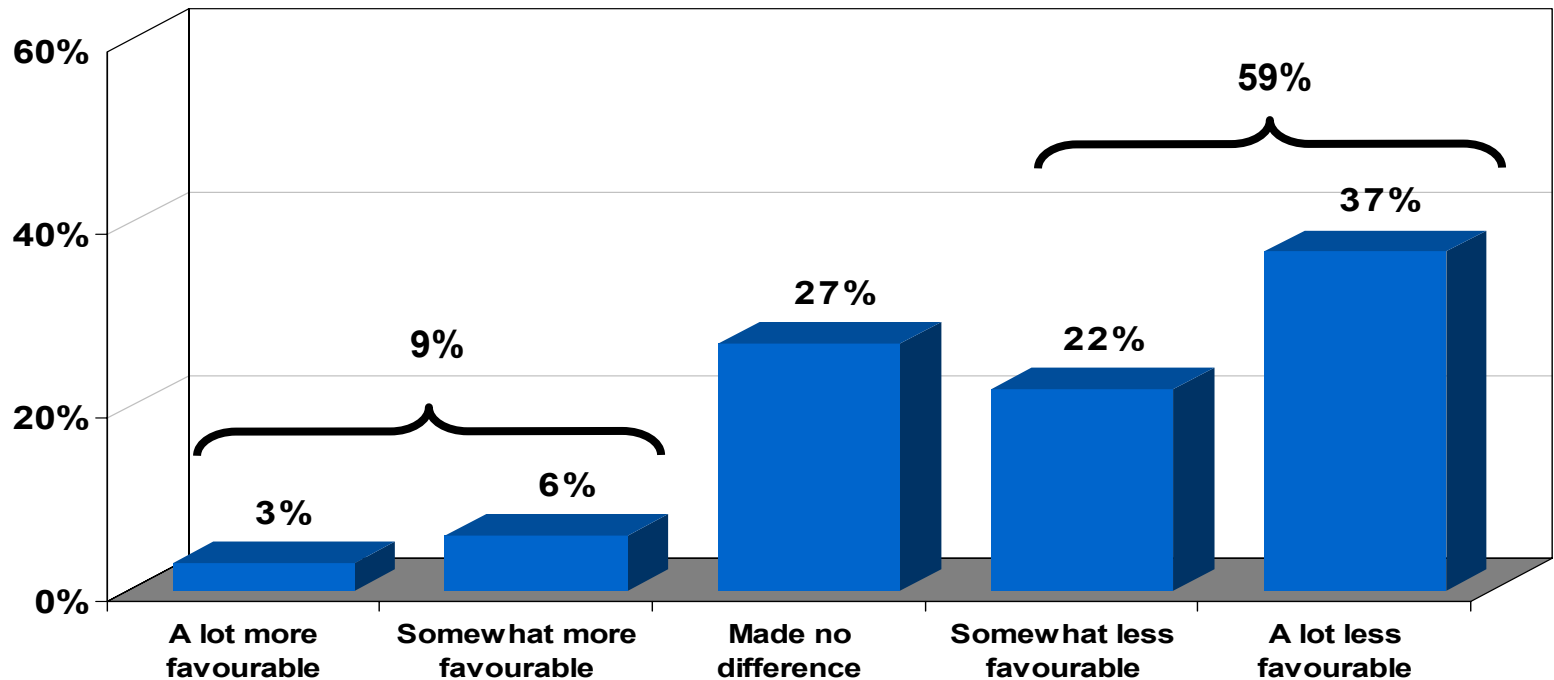
- Issue importance can be exaggerated if we look at the issue on a stand-alone basis



What is the impact of what people are hearing?

Did what you read, see, or hear about Immigration Minister Judy Sgro and issue of foreign exotic dancers leave you feeling...**(READ BATTERY)** ...towards the new federal Liberal government? *(December 2004)*

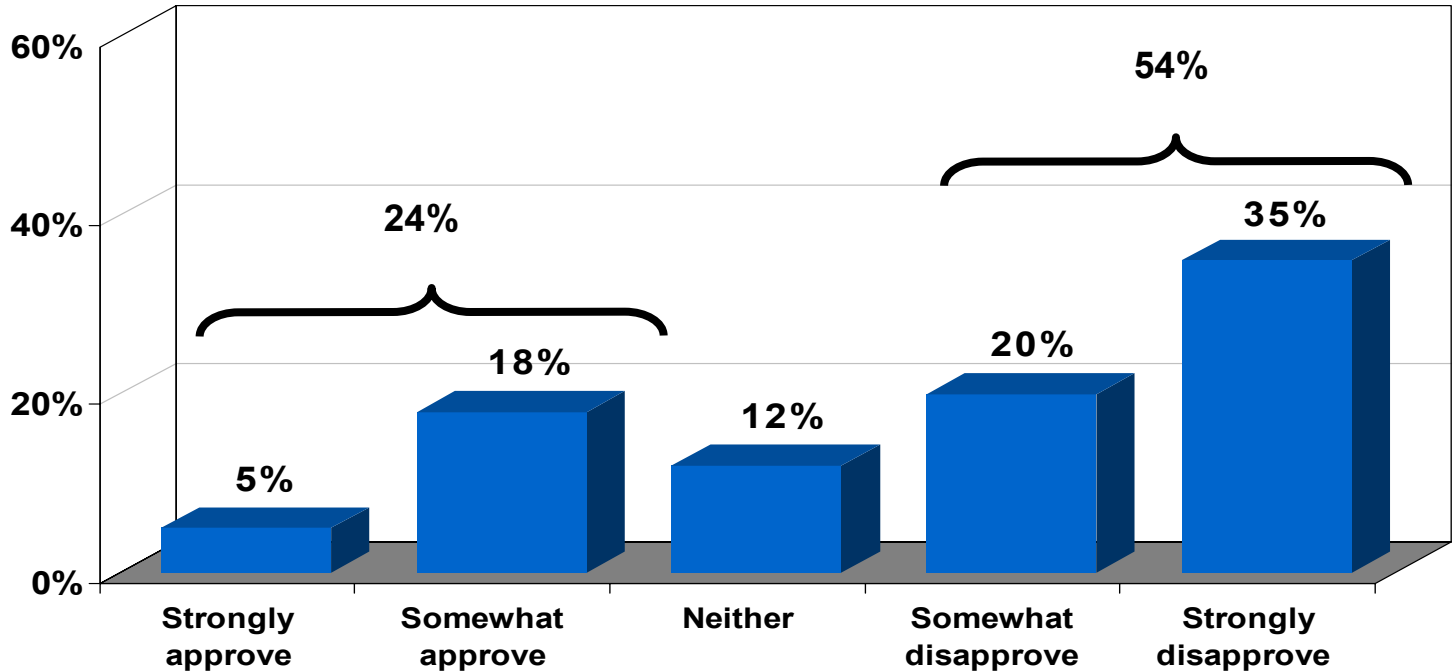
Most times we look at issues, we look at them from the point of view of their impact on an organization



What do they think of your reaction?

Do you strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove or strongly disapprove of the performance of the federal government in responding to the issue of foreign exotic dancers once it became clear that there was a problem? *(December 2004)*

- The initial reaction to most issues is negative.
- The real question is how well is a group seen to be managing the issue



Finding the Right People

Telephone 1

Strengths:

- **Fast turnaround (7-10 days)**
- **Random, nationally representative samples of general population**



Telephone 2

Weaknesses:

- **Structured interviews, tend to lack depth**
- **Visual aids can't be used**
- **Declining response rates**



Internet 1

Strengths:

- **Fast turnaround**
- **Access to results in real-time**
- **Can present visual images**



Internet 2

Strengths of Panels:

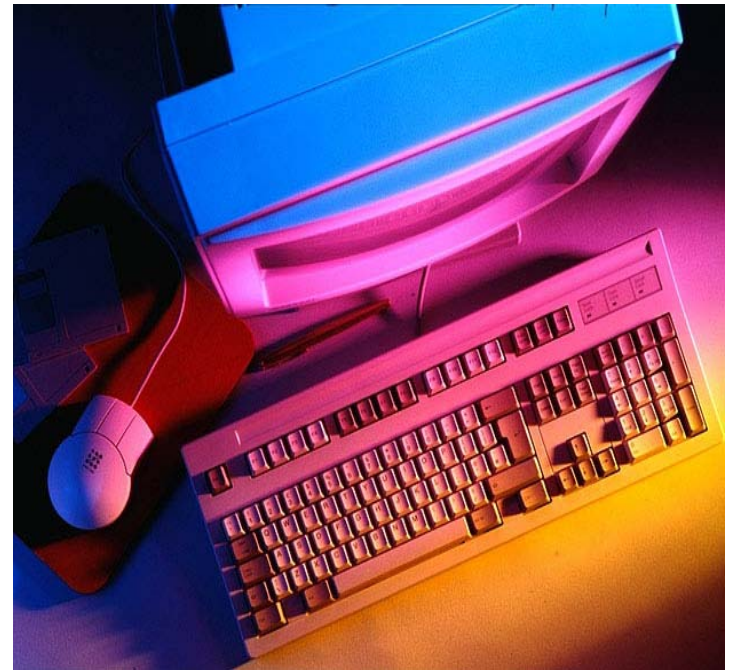
- **Allows for nationally representative samples of the Internet population**
- **High response rates (40 to 50%)**



Internet 3

Weaknesses:

- **Not a suitable methodology when opinions of general population are required**
- **Limitations on feedback for visual images**



Summary

- **Only skimmed the surface**
- **Could talk about emotions and opinion**
- **Could talk about individual differences in thought processes**
- **Could talk about mixed methods research**
- **Your turn.**