

What Constitutes a Policy Vision That the Public Can Accept?

- Considering the Issues Based on the Results of a Deliberative Survey (1) -

Masaki Taniguchi

President, NIRA
Professor, Graduate Schools for Law and Politics,
The University of Tokyo

In order to delineate a social and economic vision that will be acceptable to the public, the author selected four themes and attempted to observe “public opinion” after subjects undertook a process of careful consideration and deliberation. Based on this study, it is possible to indicate the following three points. First, the public is quite well aware of issues such as Japan’s declining birthrate and aging and declining population, and the nation’s problem of public debt. However, the second point is that these issues are not so simple as to allow members of the public to attain an easy understanding based on discussion alone. In the surveys discussed in this paper, careful consideration and deliberation resulted in a reduction in the number of neutral voters who did not clarify the positions with which they agreed and disagreed. This does not mean that the distribution of opinion always leans in either direction, and this may lead to polarization. The third point that came up is that discussions at the level of abstract principles do not readily engage people’s sympathies. The difficulty of discussing abstract themes that did not touch on the interlocutors’ personal lives was perceptible.

What lessons have been learned from these results in relation to the formulation of policy visions? First, there are no grounds for the idea that politics must avoid making the demand on people that they accept reduced benefits and increased burden. At the least, many people understand where the problems are situated, and even if it at first glance the process seems circuitous, tackling issues head-on is the shortest path to alleviating people’s anxieties with regard to the medium- to long-term future. However, when requesting acceptance of a reduction in benefits or an increase in burden, it would be effective to introduce an affordable burden (affordable by each individual with consideration of their ability to bear the burden) in parallel with efforts to eliminate waste. Finally, abstract discussions should be avoided as much as possible and people should be shown individual and concrete images of problems and solutions.

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to delineate a social and economic vision that the public can accept.

We will look now at the figures resulting from the opinion survey¹.

- A: “Government bonds are being stably absorbed, therefore there is no need to worry about the budget deficit.”
- B: “The budget deficit has reached a critical level, and we should therefore curtail the issuance of government bonds.”

Which of these statements most accurately describes your own opinion?

→ Closer to A: 7%; Closer to B: 53%

- “For the time being, we should mobilize public finances to be employed in measures to boost the economy, rather than curbing spending in order to realize fiscal consolidation”

Do you more agree or disagree with this opinion?

→ Closer to “Agree”: 34%; Closer to “Disagree”: 17%

These two questions were asked in the same survey. In the case of the first question, the majority of respondents answered that the issuance of government bonds should be curtailed, while for the second question, the number of pro-fiscal stimulus respondents was twice that of respondents opposed to the strategy.

It is not possible to determine what people's “true” opinions are simply by aggregating individual opinion poll results; these are, after all, sometimes inconsistent with each other. What trajectory do people's opinions follow when they go through the process of fully considering the views and ideas that lie in the background of multiple conflicting opinions?

Overview of the Surveys

Based on the awareness of the issues discussed above, the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) selected four themes related to Japanese society and economy and attempted to observe public opinion following a process of careful deliberation on the part of survey subjects. For details of the survey method and results, please refer to the relevant separate paper², and related detailed discussions (in Japanese). The themes selected are shown

below. The themes were selected in order to make it possible to cover a range from comparatively concrete issues, as represented by the former two, to issues related to abstract principles, as represented by the latter two.

- Increasing the burden of personally-borne medical expenses for elderly people of 75 and above
- Budget deficit and issuance of government bonds
- Size of government and public burden
- Freedom and equality

Referring to the theory and actual examples of deliberative surveys³, we decided to incorporate a process of careful deliberation into the surveys. This process is described below.

First, the survey would be conducted twice for the same subjects using an Internet survey company conducting surveys of respondents.

This internet survey would not select subjects by “random sampling,” the data would not possess “representativeness” reflecting the thinking of a statistical population (citizens as a whole), and because of this, individual values represented as percentages would not possess a significant meaning. The reader should note that the survey only allowed observation of trends such as changes over time⁴.

To take an example, the first survey asked the following question:

“Considering problems related to the size of the government and the public burden, which of the following positions is closest to your own:

A: National and local government spending should be reduced from the current level and administrative services should be streamlined / B: National and local government spending should be increased from the current level and ample administrative services should be offered.
A: The public burden, such as taxes and insurance premiums, should be reduced from the current level / B: It is unavoidable that the public burden, such as taxes and insurance premiums, will increase against the current level.”

Looking again at the same issue of “government size and public burden” employed as an example above, in the second survey, conducted after an interval of about one month, we approached the problem in the following way:

Respondents were asked to answer the same question, but this time having read the opinions of experts representative of the following positions:

- The “big government” position: Citizens should accept a tax burden commensurate with the bolstering of the social safety net
- The “small government” position: It is possible to maintain a small government even against the background of an aging society if efficiency is improved.

— We asked the respondents to answer the same question as in the first survey after reading the opinions of experts that represented each of these positions. The respondents were requested to carefully consider these positions, and to write their thoughts regarding matters such as which points in which of the opinions provided a helpful perspective, and whether reading the opinions changed their own thinking, in the free answer column.

The length of each expert opinion (about 200 characters / 4 sentences) and their level of difficulty were selected to ensure that they did not lead the respondents in a specific direction.

In addition to these two surveys, 10 to 12 respondents from the first survey were asked to participate in online interviews concerning each theme, and the change in their opinions after listening to each other's opinions was observed.

Points Highlighted by Survey Results

I would like to indicate three points here as the main findings consistently highlighted by the survey results across the four themes.

First, the public is quite well aware of issues such as Japan’s declining birthrate and aging and declining population, and the nation’s problem of public debt.

For example, in responses to the question “Are you for or against raising the burden of personally-borne medical expenses from the current 10% to 20% for people of 75 years and older with high incomes (20 million yen or more per year)?,” “Strongly agree” and “Tend to agree” far outnumbered opposed responses.

With regard to the budget deficit and the issuance of government bonds, in response to the question

A: “Government bonds are being stably absorbed, therefore there is no need to worry about the budget deficit.”

B: “The budget deficit has reached a critical level, and we should therefore curtail the issuance of government bonds.”

more respondents in both the 1st and 2nd the surveys recognized that the nation was experiencing a financial crisis (“Closer to B” = “Close to B” + “Closer to B”) than respondents who felt that there was no need to worry (“Closer to A”).

Giving consideration to the opinion of experts discussing the same issue, many respondents rated the following points as the most important: “In continuing to pass the issue on to future generations, we also face a problem in the political process, in that the voices of the younger generation and future generations are not adequately reflected. Relying on the judgment of the younger generation may be one solution” and “The current state of the nation’s finances is that tax revenues and spending on public services are entirely out of balance. We can no longer rely on postponing the problem for the future.”

However, the second point is that these issues are not so simple as to allow members of the public to attain an easy understanding based on discussion alone.

As mentioned above, in both the 1st and 2nd surveys, the number of respondents supporting an increase in the burden of personally-borne medical expenses for people of 75 years and above far outnumbered those opposed. However, looking at changes in the distribution of opinion, we find that while the number of those in agreement has remained largely the same, the number of those opposed to the idea has increased⁵. With regard to the issues of the budget deficit and the issuance of government bonds, in the 2nd survey, which was conducted following careful deliberation on the part of the survey subjects, a change was observed in that the number of respondents who were closer to A (the group that considered that there was no need to worry) increased and the number of respondents who were closer to B (the group that were aware of the nation’s financial crisis) decreased. A decrease in the number of centrists who do not clarify their agreement or disagreement following a process of deliberation and contemplation does not mean that the distribution of opinions is always skewed in either direction, and this may lead to polarization.

In addition, even when respondents indicated an understanding of increased burden, this did not equate to slavish acceptance of the idea. With regard to increasing the burden of personally-borne medical expenses for those aged 75 and above, the greatest number of respondents considered the following opinion to be the most important: “Age should not be used

to demarcate the ability to bear medical expenses. We should make the transition to the concept of affordable burden.” Here, the respondents themselves should not necessarily be assumed to be members of high-income and high-asset groups that will experience increased burden. The introduction of affordable burden was also supported by many participants in online interviews.

The opinion that there are things that must be done before increasing the burden also possesses appeal. Among the arguments made in the expert opinions regarding the size of the government and the public burden, many respondents attached the greatest importance to the following point: “If we improve efficiency to ensure that support can be provided directly to those who need it, it will be quite possible to maintain a small government, even with an aging society.” In addition, when asked whether the public burden (national and local government expenditure, various taxes and insurance premiums, etc.) should be increased or decreased, the total for “Should be increased” and “Tend to think it should be increased” was the highest for corporate tax; conversely, the total for “Should be reduced” and “Tend to think it should be reduced” was highest for administrative labor costs. This suggests that because the number of business managers and civil servants is limited, an “affordable” burden can be accepted when more tax is extracted from entities other than oneself, and administrative spending is curtailed inasmuch as it does not relate to oneself.

The third point is that discussions at the level of abstract principles do not readily engage people’s sympathies.

The words “freedom and equality” both have a positive ring, and they each have numerous meanings. Because of this, despite their exposure to carefully considered arguments offered by two experts, the most common answer offered by respondents was “Neither (of the discussions) influenced my thinking”. In addition, looking at the changes in the distribution of opinions from the 1st survey to the 2nd survey, there was a significant increase in the response “Cannot answer either way” in relation to the comparatively highly abstract topics of freedom and equality, as opposed to responses in relation to size of government and public burden. Given that both experts offered points worthy of being taken up, it may be assumed that it became difficult for respondents to know which to give their ultimate acceptance to. The difficulty of discussing abstract themes that do not relate to the level of personal life was also sometimes observed in the process of “deliberation” in the online interview format.

Conclusion

Under today's conditions, a generous distribution of the economic pie, as was the case in the nation's period of high economic growth, has become impossible in Japan; the distribution of burden and the sharing of pain are unavoidable. How, then, can we create the conditions for people to accept policies that are akin to bitter medicine? The following lessons can be derived from the survey results discussed up to the previous section.

First, there are no grounds for the idea that politics must avoid making the demand on people that they accept reduced benefits and increased burden. At the least, many people understand where the problems exist, and even if at first glance the process seems circuitous, demonstrating to citizens that they are tackling issues head-on (adopting a clear direction) is the shortest path to alleviating their anxieties with regard to the medium- to long-term future.

However, when requesting acceptance of a reduction in benefits or an increase in burden, it would be effective to introduce an affordable burden (affordable by each individual with consideration of their ability to bear the burden) in parallel with efforts to eliminate waste. Clearly, even if we were to increase the maximum tax rate for high-income earners to 90%, this could not possibly substitute for an increase in consumption tax. The major cause of Japan's national budget deficit is an expansion of social security spending; the ratio of civil servants to the total number of workers in the nation is the lowest among the developed nations, and reducing administrative labor costs would therefore represent a mere drop in the ocean. However, even if such measures would not be effective, the symbolic effect in deepening understanding among the public cannot be discounted.

Finally, abstract discussions should be avoided as much as possible. It will be important to show people individual and concrete images of problems and their solutions: for example, population decline could mean that the area in which the person lives ceases to exist; financial collapse could mean that prices rise so rapidly that salary increases cannot keep pace. When ceremonies are held to mark the signing of a bill into law by the US President, the White House often invites beneficiaries of the policy to attend, in order to publicize its effectiveness. The mass media, including the Japanese mass media, do not report on specific policy problems in an abstract manner, but rather introduce real people in need to discuss the necessity for a solution. For example, in the case of pensions, simply presenting a "model pension plan"⁶ (with some additions in a variety of forms), something which can no longer be considered to be "standard," does not encourage people to see the problem as their own.

In a period of change characterized by population decline, a declining birthrate and an aging population, globalization, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a variety of social and economic visions are under discussion in the public sphere. In delineating such visions, it is essential not only to dream of the summit to be reached, but also to consider the route up the mountain that will enable it to be reached. The Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) will continue to pursue these visions, in the most comprehensive sense, into the future.

Note

¹ “The 2017 UTokyo-Asahi Survey” (jointly conducted by Professor Masaki Taniguchi of The University of Tokyo and the Asahi Shimbun). The data collected by the survey is published at <http://www.masaki.j.u-tokyo.ac.jp/utas/utasindex.html>.

² Mari Kawamoto (2022), “*Kouki koureisha iryou wo meguru jukuryo / jukugi-gata chousa*” (“A Deliberative Survey on Medical Care for the Elderly aged 75 and Above”), NIRA Working Paper No. 2.

³ For example, James S. Fishkin (2018), *Democracy When the People are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation*, Oxford University Press (Translated as *Hitobito no koe ga hibikiau toki: Jukugi kuukan to minshu shugi*; Hayakawa Publishing, Inc.)

⁴ Masashi Hagihara (2015), “*Internet chousa ni yoru yoron kansoku no kokoromi – “Kuuki” no henka wo shousai / jinsoku ni toraeru tame no hassou to jissen*,” *Seisaku to chousa*, 9: 51-58” (“An attempt to gauge public opinion via an Internet survey – Capturing changes in opinion rapidly and in detail: Theory and practice,” *Policy and Research*, 9: 51-58); Shoko Omori (2021), “*Internet chousa no sanpuru tokusei: Kokusei chousa / mensetsu chousa to no hikaku*” (“Characteristics of Internet Survey Samples: A Comparison with Census and Face-to-face Surveys”), NIRA Working Paper No.1.

⁵ With regard to the issue of the burden of personally-borne medical expenses for elderly people of 75 and above, it is necessary to bear in mind that the format of the question varied slightly between the two surveys.

⁶ This assumes a household in which the husband earns an average income for 40 years, following which he receives an employees’ pension, and the wife is a full-time homemaker for 40 years. However, as of 2020, there were 5.71 million households in which the wife is a full-time homemaker (that is, a household in which the husband works in industries other than agriculture or forestry and the wife is not employed outside the home) as opposed to 12.4 million dual-income households (in which neither the husband nor the wife is employed in the agricultural or forestry industries).



Masaki Taniguchi

Professor Taniguchi is the President of the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA), and a Professor in the Graduate Schools for Law and Politics of The University of Tokyo. He holds a Doctorate in Law from The University of Tokyo. Professor Taniguchi specializes in the study of political science and contemporary Japanese politics.