How Smart is the American Public?

The possibility of having a Citizen Cabinet raises the question of whether the public really has something to offer. The average person is by definition, well, average. So why isn't it better to simply rely on the experts without bothering to consult the public?

It is true that many citizens are poorly informed, and in some cases disinformed, on public policy issues. That is why a key part of the Citizen Cabinet design is to give citizens accurate and unbiased information about the issues before they come to their conclusions.

But when the public thinks about an issue and comes to its conclusion, how smart is it likely to be? The surprising answer: pretty smart. Much smarter than average and often smarter than the experts.

How do we know this? Numerous experiments have been done where a large group of people have been given a task, such as estimating the number of jelly beans in a large bowl. When their estimates are averaged the answer is remarkably accurate. On the game show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?,* when contestants use their lifeline and ask the audience, the audience is right the vast majority of the time.

Why is this? Aren't there a lot of dunces out there in the public? Yes, but what is key is that the dunces are dunces in different ways—thus they tend to cancel each other out in any sample that is large enough. The net effect is that whatever intelligence there is in the group sets a dominant tendency that tends to be remarkably accurate.

The fact that majority opinion tends to be pretty smart was actually discovered in the 18th Century by a French mathematician named Condorcet, who had a strong impact on some of the Founders of the American Republic. Condorcet proved mathematically that the majority position of a large group of people is likely to be far more intelligent than the average of the group. Let us assume that among a group of 1,000 people the average likelihood of each one of them knowing the right answer to a question is barely above chance—say 50.5 percent. Condorcet demonstrated that the likelihood that the majority position of the 1,000 people will be correct is far more than just 50.5 percent--rather, it is 62 percent. The chance the majority view of 10,000 people will be correct is even higher--83 percent.

More recently, methods for tapping this collective intelligence have been increasingly applied in various fields including business and intelligence gathering, summarized in the best selling book, aptly titled *The Wisdom of Crowds,* by James Surowiecki. Research also shows, however, that this collective intelligence can be derailed by misinformation.

The aim of the Citizen Cabinet is to apply the principles of tapping collective intelligence to the realm of public policy, countering misinformation, and bringing the underlying wisdom of the American people to bear on the important issues of the day. Not only will the quality of our decision-making improve, but the level of our policy debate as well.