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Public Opinion
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Across Policy
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Public Opinion Data and Policymaking During COVID-19 and Beyond: Insights from Interviews Across Policy and Politics



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ABOUT MSDI: Monash Sustainable Development Institute (MSDI) is a world leading institute bringing about change all over the world through pioneering research, education and innovation. Part of Monash University, we have 200+ academic and professional staff and draw on expertise across 10 faculties to respond to some of the biggest environmental, economic and social issues, to build a healthier, stronger, and more sustainable world. MSDI works with policymakers, philanthropists and practitioners to devise practical solutions to some of the most pressing problems faced by Australia and its region. Leveraging our expertise in systems and behavioural change, we shape policy, build capacity, and develop strategies that unpack complex issues, test innovative solutions, and support systems transformations for sustainable development.

Declarations of Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts to declare.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no known conflicts of interest. The research team is not affiliated with or involved in any organisations relevant to the topic of this review.

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Background

As reflections on the COVID-19 response surface, there is a growing demand for greater transparency and understanding of how evidence shapes policymaking. For example, the conclusions drawn in the Fault Lines review (Shergold et al., 2022) of Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted issues such as the lack of transparency surrounding decision-making processes and ambiguities regarding the evidence used to justify government interventions.

Recently, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, in partnership with the Australian Public Service Commission, commissioned the Monash Sustainable Development Institute to explore how public opinion data (POD) is used to inform policy development. This initiative titled '*Bridging Public Opinion and Policy: A Mixed-Methods Analysis*' aimed to pinpoint best practices for leveraging Australian public opinions, sentiments, attitudes, and behaviours into policymaking.

Bridging Public Opinion and Policy was structured around four key research activities, each designed to assess the impact, strengths, and limitations of POD in decision-making:

1. **Rapid Evidence Review:** This systematic review examined existing literature to understand how POD was used to inform policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. **Analysis of the COVID-19 Pulse Survey administered by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet:** This aimed to understand the relevance of POD during the pandemic and its influence on decision-making, using the Pulse Survey as a case study.
3. **Practice Review:** This review, which is the focus of this report, explored broader practices in Australia regarding the use and impact of POD in both crisis (COVID-19) and 'business as usual' contexts.
4. **Deliberative Dialogue:** Informed by the insights from the previous components, this final stage aimed to collaboratively identify and establish best practices for effectively leveraging the use of POD.

Together, these activities form a comprehensive approach to understanding and enhancing the application of POD in policymaking. Initially, the project was designed to focus on the use of POD in crisis contexts, with the COVID-19 period providing a rich backdrop for exploration. However, insights from these initial activities (1 & 2) prompted a decision to broaden the scope to include 'business as usual' contexts. This shift reflects an acknowledgment of the need to understand how POD is used in a wider range of policy-making scenarios, not just in response to crises. Accordingly, this expanded focus was incorporated into Activities 3 and 4. **For more detailed information on the project and its findings, please visit <https://anzsog.edu.au/news/public-opinion-data-and-policy/>.**

Executive Summary

This practice review aims to provide a grounded insight into the practical applications and implications of Public Opinion Data (POD) in policymaking, delving into its strategic use during the COVID-19 pandemic and in business-as-usual scenarios. Through semi-structured interviews with eight senior policymakers and social researchers, the study unveils some of the theoretical and practical considerations of integrating POD into policymaking.

The findings reveal that POD serves three primary functions: enhancing understanding of community sentiments to guide policy development, informing the design of behavioural change strategies, and gauging public acceptance of policies. It was noted as particularly useful during the pandemic, enabling a more responsive and effective approach in a fast-changing and uncertain environment.

The research underscores the importance of a rigorous and collaborative framework for designing, collecting, and disseminating POD. Such an approach ensures that the data remains credible, actionable, and aligned with policy goals.

However, the integration of POD into policymaking is fraught with challenges, notably the risk of politicisation. The study highlights a persistent tension between the theoretical impartiality of POD and its practical application, which can sometimes skew towards political ends, undermining its effective application in policy development. Moreover, the political implications of POD often lead to underutilisation and lack of transparency, with POD's contributions going unrecognised in public and governmental discourse, particularly in contested areas.

Overall, insights from the research offer an overview of best practices in the application of POD in policymaking and its challenges. These findings underscore the need for an enhanced understanding of the approaches to navigate the technical and political considerations for using POD in decision-making processes.

I. Introduction

Public Opinion Data (POD) has emerged as a critical tool in shaping policy decisions, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 era, which witnessed an unprecedented uptake of such data. Despite this increased attention, there remains limited documented evidence on how POD has influenced policy-making processes as showcased in Bragge et al (2024).¹ Moreover, insights from the Prime Minister and Cabinet Pulse Survey Analysis² underscore that while POD is a useful source to inform policymaking, its influence is contingent upon various factors such as its fit for purpose, credibility, soundness, and the specific policy context.

This report seeks to bridge this knowledge gap and delve deeper into the role and impact of POD in policy-making. In order to gain a grounded insight into the practical applications and implications of POD, we conducted interviews with eight senior decision-makers across various jurisdictions and levels of government. The aim of the interviews was to explore the experiences of interviewees regarding the use of public opinion data in policy, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 context provided a framework for examining how POD was utilised in the public service, however the interviews also delved into its application in non-crisis ('business as usual') contexts, facilitating a comparison between these two scenarios.

For the purposes of this research, POD was defined as the *aggregate of individual attitudes, beliefs and self-reported behaviours on a particular topic that is representative of a specific community or population*. Notably, our definition of POD excludes qualitative approaches such as focus groups, and political polling which is designed to focus on political viewpoints and is partisan driven.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section II: Methods – Describes the methodology used to conduct the practice review.
- Section III: The Role and Purpose of Public Opinion Data – This section outlines the role and purpose of POD in policymaking.
- Section IV: Process – It summarises the insights into how POD is designed, collected, and disseminated to ensure it serves as a robust evidence input for decision-making.
- Section V: Impact – This section provides examples that establish a direct link between POD insights and policy outcomes, further discussing the nuances of decision-making and the utilisation of POD.

¹ Bragge, P., Kellner, P., Tsering, D., & Delafosse, V. (2024). *Use of public opinion data to inform COVID-19 policymaking: ANZSOG research insights no. 31*. ANZSOG. <https://doi.org/10.54810/JGMN5776>

² Mendoza Alcantara, A., & Saeri, A. (2024). *Insights to Action: An analysis of the COVID-19 Pulse Survey: ANZSOG Research Insights no. 34*. Australia and New Zealand School of Government. <https://doi.org/10.54810/YPUA1328>

II. Methods

The practice review employed an established methodology of the MSDI Evidence Review Service, which gathers insights in parallel with desktop reviews by interviewing policymakers, professionals, managers, and leading researchers in the field of interest. This form of enquiry is not at the level of a stand-alone qualitative study; it is designed to gather a smaller number of high-level insights that can be intersected with the knowledge gained from desktop reviews of journal articles (and in the case of this project, a range of other research activities as described above). This approach has been published in several peer-reviewed publications that combine desktop reviewing with 6 - 8 qualitative interviews. (Wright et al. 2019; 2020; 2024; Gooley et al. 2024; Kunstler, Lennox, and Bragge 2019; Wright et al. 2020; 2019; 2024).

A semi-structured interview framework (see Appendix I) was developed with input from experts in the field including policymakers from the Australian Public Service Commission and representatives of ANZSOG. Ethics approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee [Reference: 30009] prior to recruitment and data collection commencing.

Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants [Patton MQ. *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.; 1990] This involved collaborating with a small group of policymakers involved in POD and representatives of ANZSOG to identify potential participants. The Monash research team also generated a list of potential participants using their knowledge of the field and based on their involvement in COVID-related applied behaviour change work. Participants included five federal/state Deputy Secretaries, a former Minister, and two senior social researchers (see Table 1). Details of who consented to interviews were not shared beyond the Monash research team.

All interview participants were invited using an ethics-approved standard email invitation with an accompanying explanatory statement. Those who agreed to participate provided written or verbal consent prior to participation. All interviews were conducted online, and audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed using a 3rd party automatic transcription service. Analysis of interview transcripts was undertaken using content analysis to identify key themes in the data. [Vaismoradi, Mojtaba, Hannele Turunen, and Terese Bondas. "Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis: Implications for Conducting a Qualitative Descriptive Study." *Nursing & Health Sciences* 15, no. 3 (September 2013): 398–405. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048>] NVivo software was used for coding (Lumivero, 2022). Two researchers independently analysed the interview transcripts and discussed key intersecting themes.

Themes were inductively identified and labelled during analysis of transcripts. We grouped these themes under the headings 'Purpose', 'Process' and 'Impact' as a working hypothesis, based on preliminary findings suggesting that the impact of POD is intrinsically linked to its collection purpose and the processes involved in its design, collection, and dissemination. The identified themes from analysis of all eight interview transcripts are presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Participant Profile

	Participant Profile
1	Market and social researcher
2	Behavioural scientist / social researcher
3	Senior Public Servant
4	Former Minister
5	Senior Public Servant
6	Senior Public Servant
7	Senior Public Servant
8	Senior Public Servant

III. The Role and Purpose of Public Opinion Data

The Role of Public Opinion Data in Policymaking

This section explores the role and purpose of POD in policymaking. Interviews underscored the crucial role that POD plays at the intersection of public sentiment and policy development, highlighting a strong appetite among policymakers to align their initiatives with the values and expectations of the communities they serve. Three key use cases for the collection of POD were identified:

1. To *understand* community beliefs and attitudes, where POD informs the problem definition and therefore policy development.
2. To identify potential ways to *influence* changes in behaviour, beliefs and attitudes, where POD data is key in designing behaviour change strategies, shaping effective policy narratives and communication strategies.
3. To *test* social licence, where POD data is used to assess the public's acceptance and support of policy initiatives, ensuring that proposed policies are socially sustainable and publicly endorsed.

Interviewees recognised the dynamic nature of POD applications, which facilitate the creation of valuable feedback loops. By iteratively collecting POD, policymakers can measure public reactions to policies and subsequently adjust policy settings and messaging based on these insights.

"It was kind of a two-way thing. Yes, it would help directly to what you were going to say and how you're going to say it, but it would also help frame the policy direction." [Participant 4, Former Minister]

"It has two purposes. I think one is in part to inform the interested public ... you need to explain what the parameters are, what we are working with, and then seeking their views on: "so now you've got that understanding, then give us advice on what's important to you." So it's both helping to lead change, but it's also having their input into the change, if that makes sense." [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

Respondents highlighted that POD is particularly critical when addressing complex problems at pivotal moments in policy development or in crisis contexts. It proves especially valuable when traditional data sources or administrative data do not fully capture the nuances of the policy landscape, such as differentiated impacts across diverse groups or when highly contentious issues are at stake. This unique application of POD ensures that policy decisions are informed by a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and real-world sentiments.

"[W]hen we are wrestling with the difficult problems that are difficult to solve, that's when it's probably most useful because we don't have all the answers ever. And so therefore we need to get lots of different inputs and sources in terms of what the public thinks and that. So yeah, I'd say at the hardest points of the policy edge is where it's very useful." [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“[A]dmin data shows us who is getting access to [medical] treatments but doesn't tell us why. So sometimes we could potentially use something like a consumer survey, a sentiment survey, rather than to inform more admin data analytics, use it the other way around to work out the whys that emanate from the analytical data.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

Comparing the Purpose of POD: Public Servants and Politicians

The purpose of POD varies across political and public service domains, reflecting different motivations between politicians and public servants. Politicians often view POD through the lens of their experiences with political polling, especially during election campaigns. This use of POD was seen to be a helpful input for framing long-term agendas in a way that resonates with the public. In addition, from a politician’s perspective, POD not only helps in shaping campaign strategies but it also aids in understanding and influencing public sentiment while in office. This enables them to support ongoing policies or fulfill campaign promises by influencing public opinion or behaviors, a process one interviewee likened to "government lobbying its own constituency" [Participant 1, social researcher].

“Occasionally they [public opinion] might determine an issue one way or another, but generally the proposition was we've got our policy frame that's gone through a particular approach. It's been tested in other forums, elections, policy committees, the bureaucracy, the parliaments, a complex institutional kind of setting. What's the best way in which given the community attitudes as reflected in such a complex, multilevel, multi-institutional kind of community, what's the best way you can pitch an argument or a theme or a direction of policy into that? And at the same time, clearly how can you maintain momentum for the policy and political agenda you're trying to run?” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

“Ministers ... don't want to be led by public opinion. They lead, but they want to know what public opinion is on that topic. They make the decisions and it's participative. It's not a direct democracy in Australia where the public opinion prevails.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

For public servants, POD is viewed as a tool for understanding and engaging with public sentiment based on evidence-driven directives, such as promoting vaccination uptake. It serves as one of many tools to shape service delivery and policy implementation by incorporating community's inputs and needs.

“I guess it's an engagement and smaller evidence gathering exercise as we go through entity service planning for new hospital sites and that sort of thing ... We might think X is important, but once you go out and test it with the public, they're like, no, you're crazy. That's not important to us...So just making ivory tower type decisions and then implementing without working with the people that we are serving is the wrong way to go about our work.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“...attitudes to age care and who should fund elements of aged care. So wherever those opportunities are presented to me, I'm very keen to leverage that and to seek, to use that data to be part of, it's never the main driver, but to be part of policy development process in terms of what are the views and attitudes and how do they affect then the policy frameworks and approaches that are developed.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

“I think if you have robust methodologically sound, public opinion data, that should be used as an input because it is a proxy for a number of things. It's a proxy for implementation facility. It's a proxy for acceptability ...beyond just the interest of an individual or the noisiest squeakiest advocacy wheel” [Participant 7, Senior Public Servant]

Although public servants are mandated to use POD impartially, in practice, this distinction can become blurred. The intended use of POD to reinforce clear policy directions occasionally overlaps with broader political applications, potentially undermining the effectiveness of POD in policy development by obscuring its primary objectives. The quotes below illustrate the nuances that arise because of the somewhat differing perspectives that politicians and public servants bring to POD:

“I think is that we've got to be really careful about how we use it ... in a sense, the opinion of the public on a decision taken by a government to do or not do a thing is really something for the political class to engage with and worry about ... ‘Are people going to like this? Is this going to get me votes?’ That's not anything that we should really be engaged in at all. But the question of how likely are people to respond positively or negatively to this particular intervention in the system, then I think so long as we are conscious and deliberate and careful in how that's done, and so long as we are very clear upfront on the kind of commissioning rules for getting it, then I think it can serve a legitimate purpose alongside financial data, service use, data, economic modelling, all those kinds of things.” [Participant 8, Senior Public Servant]

“So the times where it feels like it's more commonly used is where something is politically contentious ... and a minister or someone high up who's politically attuned to what the minister office wants, ask the question on where do people sit on this issue or if we're going to devote time and resourcing into this, we want a better handle of where people are.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

“[T]here's difference between public service and the politician ... it's almost like the public servant is usually the comms division ... my job is sell this, I'll go and find out how to sell it. So then what they're looking for is what's the best way to communicate and express that?” [Participant 1, Social Researcher]

The Role and Purpose of Public Opinion Data during the COVID-19 pandemic

Our interviews delved into the utilisation of POD during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to gather tangible examples of its role in policymaking. The quotes below illustrate its critical role and purpose throughout this period.

POD served as a crucial tool to understand people’s experience, particularly given the uncertainty and novelty of the pandemic, including how perceptions changed over the course of the pandemic:

“[T]here was probably more fear at the beginning of the covid pandemic and less willingness to challenge everything and people were more compliant. But as with anything over time that compliance starts to diminish, and that's a time when I think the importance of public attitudes and public opinion to measures as part of the pandemic became more prominent in framing the response at a state and territory government level.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

“Well, it helps show whether or not your messaging and the information that you're sharing is cutting through. Are people understanding it? Are they listening to it? Do they accept it? So it's a way of what you're intending in setting public policy, but then it's finding out how's the community responding to it? Do they know it exists? Do they believe it? Are they following it? So it was really useful from that perspective.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

Crucially, POD also provided a ‘canary in the coalmine’ signal that enabled further enquiry to understand influences on public sentiment:

“[W]e certainly looked and took from that survey concerns around vaccine hesitancy and that led us to a more analytical approach...that allowed us to look at patterns of vaccine hesitancy and whether they were income related, whether they're geographically related, whether they were CALD group related, and there was elements of all of those things... Certain CALD groups, even within CALD groups ...[they had] vastly different vaccine [uptake] results because ...they [each group] had a ...newspaper that was either anti or provax ...So there were all sorts of wonderful reasons to influence vaccines. But the concern emanated from surveys.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

It also reinforced the value of POD in challenging assumptions:

“[W]e run the risk of assuming that people think the way we do all the time... We were so fixated on the role vaccines could play in the Covid pandemic, we saw them as an overwhelming positive. And then... Twitter ... was talking about Bill Gates and planting chips and stuff...we did a survey and a staggeringly high percentage of people subscribed to that view. And moments like that make you pause and just think ... we can't assume that what we think is right because we're in the middle of this event is the way that it's going to be perceived in the broader community.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

Shaping public communications and refining government messaging during the pandemic emerged as one of the most frequently cited uses of POD, highlighting its pivotal role in ensuring that official communication strategies resonated effectively with the public with the ultimate desired outcome of influencing behaviour change:

“[W]hen you think about it in the totality of things in that extraordinary period, people got the message and overwhelmingly stuck to the rules. And you could say despite all the dramas, all the costs, all the aggro on a world scale landed a pretty good public policy outcome of minimising deaths and illness. That's not a bad result, it cost a fortune and had a few other ramifications. But in terms of the public policy goal of minimising the spread and minimising illness and death, it was relatively speaking a success and the media strategy was a key part of that, and getting the feel for what the public's diverse views on that were was a key part of the framing and delivery of messages.” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

POD was described as important in providing leaders with confidence that COVID measures were supported by the community. This also played a role in how they socialised policy decisions:

“[W]e also had to ensure that we had community tolerance and acceptance and understanding. So we used the data to show, for example, if people were being asked questions about face mask use in terms of what people were saying about that, if they understood if they were using it, if they were following the restrictions. So those sorts of

things just gave us constantly testing social licence really.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“It was almost a temperature guide as to where community levels of concern were. It was managing community expectations and community anxiety and community delivery was a critical part of that whole process, and many, many things were managed then. But [COVID-19 POD survey] was an important part several times a week of not just the comms and the positioning, but the policy positioning the policy direction. Yes, of course the delivery and the framing, but it would inform what's the community tolerance level for all of this?” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

“[P]remiers also said publicly in their statements that, and indicated that they were assured of this, that there was public support for the public health and social measures that they were imposing ... that was being informed by some data, telling them that, and that they were regularly checking that.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

In the context of COVID-19, the differences in the use of POD also reflected the distinct powers of federal versus state governments. It was particularly noted that the Commonwealth had limited authority to shape the health response, which in turn constrained the rationale for collecting POD:

“[S]ince 1901, the states have the health powers and the enforcement powers. So the states are the ones who were using those powers to impose all the public health and social measures. And so it makes sense that they were the ones checking with their constituencies more about their willingness to tolerate certain things, what they felt was justifiable, all of that. The Commonwealth doesn't have any of those powers. So it was less intuitive for the Commonwealth to be using public opinion data over the top or as a counter.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

Limitations of Public Opinion Data

Some interviewees highlighted the limitations of POD and in what circumstances it provides less value. One scenario where POD is not useful is where the required information can be gathered or estimated by other means, such as administrative data or user level data:

“I guess my rules of thumb would be things around that there's a clear knowledge gap of where people are in terms of their behaviours and attitudes. So for instance, I think something where we wouldn't have an ongoing survey is maybe gambling behaviour. We might have other measures or proxies of that or someone else is studying it or you can kind of get it from smaller scale research or feedback from service users of crisis support or just knowing the money going into it” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

“[A]re there any good proxies for the specific question that we're trying to test that might exist in data that's already collected or that might be able to be inferred from activity that's happening elsewhere rather than sort of commissioning from scratch?” [Participant 8, Senior Public Servant]

Another factor is the nature of the issue at hand being undertaken, particularly when the problem is technical. Technical issues often require specialised knowledge and expertise that the general public may not possess, making it less appropriate for public opinion to inform decisions in these areas:

“The less helpful is when it's very technical work that you're doing ... public opinion data would be of no value ... it would be then more in the implementation of that work that you would go and seek public opinion data ... then you'd go out and work with the public to say, well this is what we are thinking we're going to do. How is that going to work for you? Is that useful?” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

Some interviewees acknowledged that POD requires more effort and resources to collect and that its uptake is also limited to workplace norms:

I led a planning task force for the development of a master plan for [hospital] which included potentially drawing in another campus about two kilometres away ... It would've been really good, I think, to have had the time and the capacity to get some views from the community around what they would want in that second site and how it might be utilised” [Participant 7, Senior Public Servant]

“I think the public sector is much more used to using programmatic data, grey literature and that kind of thing” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

Drivers Influencing the Use of Public Opinion Data: Crisis vs Non-Crisis Context

Many respondents described the unique context of the COVID-19 crisis, characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability as providing a licence to gather and use POD. They noted that this marked a striking departure from business-as-usual practices.

“If you think about covid, the evidence was not settled, especially early on ... health experts and infectious disease experts and public health experts came with their perspectives and knowledge and built on everything that they already knew. But we also needed to be able to understand how things were being received.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“I know that probably through the peak covid period there was an ability to turn around some of this stuff [policy decisions] very quickly, but before that jolt to the system, I think ministers generally operated on the assumption of, well, we've made the decision we'd expect to see it out in the world in the next few weeks. And at that point, you're very constrained in what can you do to inform often quite small tweaks.” [Participant 8, Senior Public Servant]

“I've never seen views on things on such big questions evolve so rapidly and come and gone in such a spectacular way. So just the immediacy and instantaneous nature of what was going on, which actually is just a function of the degree of focus that people had on it. If a lot of people spend an hour a day thinking about the pandemic, that's very different to spending three minutes a year thinking about marriage equality and that basically is the process by which change can more rapidly happen.” [Participant 1, Social Researcher]

Additionally, it was acknowledged that reflections on the effectiveness of POD during the crisis have not permeated into post-crisis contexts:

“[W]hether we've ever set back and thought, well, they [POD surveys] work really well, we should do them more often, or whether we've just defaulted to the way we used to do things pre-covid, it's something worth reflecting on.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

“[I]t was too hard to make the case to continue it in a non-covid context ... So I think outside of a context where there is such a salient and pressing unknown that you need to answer, it's lower down on the list of things people naturally think to ask for.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

IV. Designing, Collecting and Disseminating Public Opinion Data for Decision-Making

Design Process

This section describes insights on the design, collection and dissemination of POD in decision-making processes.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of clearly defining the objectives for using POD and engaging key decision-makers and social researchers as an essential initial step. This clarity ensures that the data collection and analysis are, from the outset, directly applicable to the policy questions at hand, making the data actionable and focused:

“[W]e're trying to get better at the start of the process, work out the questions we want. So if you know where you want to take a process, policy system, whatever it is and where you are, then you need to think about the steps to get there and what would support or distract you from that direction or even to test whether that direction is the right one... If you involve the person who is the policy decision maker in the steps prior to research and test what they want, where they want to go and what they think will support or detract from their argument, then that influences the research and the data you extract and the way you present it.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

“[T]o ensure that we are really clear on why we need to know the answer to a question before we ask it. Not that we know what the answer will be, but why ... there is just so much data that washes around the system that no one has a clue what they want to do with, and yet we have collected it. And why is completely unclear to me, and often my plea to people is actually, if you can't be certain why you're going to need it, just don't collect it anyway.” [Participant 8, Senior Public Servant]

However, in crisis situations, under time pressures and uncertainty, the process of engaging key decision-makers and establishing clear, precise questions from the outset faces significant challenges. Moreover, the evolving nature of crises means that initial questions may need to be adjusted or expanded as the situation develops, making the decision-making process less linear:

“[I]t was a bit of a blur. And the conversations about it, I remember two of them were in the lifts with our head of comms and one was getting coffee or something like that. So things were moving so fast” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

“[W]e have to keep the survey to 15 or so minutes in length. So there was only so many questions we could fit in each time. So we internally as a team went through quite a bit of a process to decide what are the topic areas and questions that we're in having to pull stuff in or out. Different people would come to us and we'd have to prioritise 'em based on our perception of what's most useful to government or what's more novel and need and that kind of thing” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

Some noted that collaborating with academia and policy-relevant researchers is particularly useful in crisis contexts for an optimal design process:

“[T]he more you can involve, and this is more generally with academia, the more we can involve them in those what we think is policy relevant research, then they ask the right questions of the data or ask the right questions, the people that informs that data and then we're in better place.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

“[I]n a crisis context, I think you'd go to an expert external organisation and say, this is what we need. Can you please design it and come back to us and we'll work with you. But we'll hand it over to people who really know what they're doing in ordinary in peace time as we say.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

Collaborating with external stakeholders or commissioning work, was found beneficial not only in crisis situations but also in addressing internal capability gaps. While some noted that there is sufficient internal capability to design POD surveys in the Australian public sector, others acknowledged some capability gaps.

“I guess the difficulty...is that sometimes people dunno exactly what to ask for... sometimes we'd [social researchers] be asked to work on areas, and as I'm sure you aware at the start of a project, the first bit is the discovery. What work's been done before, give us all your documents, we'll review it all, and half the time be given several big consulting reports that have been commissioned to answer the exact same question we were. And they'd really just come to us because they hadn't actioned any of it or didn't quite understand what was in it. And we'd just rehash a lot of it or we'd translate it. And if it weren't for us, I'd worry that it would be sitting in a drawer collecting very expensive dust. And so that translation piece or having internal people to talk to feels quite important when the public service is staffed by generalists.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

“If we're designing something ourselves, we have an internal evaluation team as well. So if we're designing a survey ourselves, we go to them and get their support in regards to being able to ask questions that is going to be able to pull out the sort of information that we are seeking to pull out” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“[In the UK] there is a kind civil service, social research community, people who are badged as social researchers. Within each department there is actually a role description distinction between whether someone's badged as an analyst or a generalist in a way that's not done in Australia. So in that sense there were people who are so-and-so team within the education department wanted to survey teachers or understand a thing they could then consult almost like an internal consultancy, the social research team who could help craft that stuff and develop it [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

One participant observed that perceived in-house capacity appears to influence perceptions of credibility:

“I don't think that most executives would trust an internal report that's analysed data or done a survey anywhere near as much as they'd trust a big four consulting firm badged report. And so often it's just, if you want to know an answer, it's seen as the kind of easier and better thing to do just to go out externally.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

Credibility and Soundness

The credibility of the data and soundness of the methodology was often mentioned as a critical condition for its integration into decision-making processes.

“I've never had a minister say, oh, that's rubbish. I'm not interested in that ... if it's high quality and it's not anything that's blatantly skewed or unrepresentative or biased, but if it's assured and seen to be something that adds value and are quite objective in that respect, then I think ministers treat it with a great deal of import in the policy development process.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

“[M]aking sure, I guess it's rigorous enough that people relying on it know they can rely on it... the understanding of research is pretty low for a lot of decision makers and people, and fair enough, not everyone has to be an expert, but someone could get a dodgy survey, not critique it and then be led astray.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

“So it's balancing the source of it [POD] and how it was collected in terms of how much emphasis and input you put onto it [for decision making].” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

Ensuring that data collection methods are robust and that the sources are impartial was also identified as critical for maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the insights derived:

“[I]s it a reputable organisation and do they have a credibility, already established credibility in doing this kind of survey, public opinion work, and is there any direct connection or advantage gained? It's like when a pharmaceutical company says, this drug is awesome ... that's treated differently than a study where it's people who are not related to the producers of something or no direct financial benefit or incentive, but objectively saying, this is what we found.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

“[D]irectly testing public opinion using an evidence-based surveying approach means that we had a lot more confidence in what the information was that we were relying on than just relying on media reporting.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

The credibility of POD compared to information depicted in the media was also described:

“[T]he media comes with a certain perspective and they are in many times it's not just factual reporting. They were prosecuting from a point of view, whereas directly testing public opinion using an evidence-based surveying approach means that we had a lot more confidence in what the information was that we were relying on than just relying on media reporting” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

Translation and Dissemination

Some interviewees emphasised the critical role of effective data translation and dissemination in facilitating the uptake of insights, as well as the importance of acknowledging the limitations inherent in the data:

“[W]e'd make a giant slide pack basically with summaries of the data tables breaking it down, ... partly based on you'd have a bit of analysis pre plan, which is okay, the department of

health or whoever, they've asked for these questions, they want to understand these things ... sometimes people off the back of that would then ask for, oh, can you say anything more about this? Or did you find anything on that? And that might lead to another pack being developed." [Participant 2, social researcher]

"[O]ne of the benefits of it being a longitudinal survey done very regularly, like monthly, and that was quite high profile and people were emailing us and giving us feedback ... but does this answer that or am I right in thinking this? It allowed the products to get quite polished by the end. We had quite standard words for a lot of stuff by the end and making sure, for instance, if the sample size for a subgroup was below 30, we either wouldn't report it or make sure the caveats were quite well known. They went through a lot of text editing to make sure it was very readable and not too jargony." [Participant 2, social researcher]

V. Impact of Public Opinion Data in Policymaking

Linking POD insights to policy outputs and outcomes

We sought insights from participants on how POD influenced decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. While only a few examples clearly demonstrated a direct link, these are outlined below.

POD enabled the pinpointing of a specific community with high vaccination hesitancy, which allowed for the implementation of targeted interventions designed to directly address the underlying causes of this hesitancy:

“[O]ne thing we found that different CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] groups were responding to vaccines, the idea of being vaccinated differently, like markedly differently ... so that led to quite an extensive data analytics piece that teased that out to the point that we could isolate a particular community in [state capital city]. And it was because their preacher or priest ... was an anti-vaxxer and he was preaching to the non-converted ... but that all started initially from a broad sentiment survey where we knew that there was a problem.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

POD shaped communication strategies, positioning the policy direction to gain social licence:

“[S]pecific example of vaccinations ... 70% of people are going to get the jab, Then you've got another 15% that you could get [vaccinated] ... how do you get the people above 70%? So you then go try and find the ways to get people around that and provide confidence in [vaccines]... I reckon that was going to get us up to about 85 is just some of these calm ... garden variety persuasion messages. And then my advice in the end was, you're going to get to 93, the last eight you're going to get half of them just bullying ... you can't go to work unless you get the jab and they'll go.” [Participant 1, Social Researcher]

“We saw that opening a window in fresh air was undervalued by a lot of people or not as well known. And so highlighting that I think helped change a response to actually, you need a campaign for that now.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

“But [POD] was an important part of not just the comms and the positioning, but the policy direction. Yes, of course the delivery and the framing, but it would into what's the community tolerance level for all of this? What nuances need to be inflected into the policy delivery in many, many levels at the same time as understanding what it meant for the delivery of the message?” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

Balancing POD with other evidence inputs

The impact of POD is difficult to assert given the nuances of decision-making processes. On one hand, it was acknowledged that POD was regarded as one of many inputs shaping decisions and was never the primary driver of evidence in decision-making processes, in both COVID-19 and business as usual contexts. However, despite its supportive role, the specific contributions and influence of POD remain challenging to isolate and articulate clearly, as illustrated by the following perspectives from our interviews:

“[Y]es, the [COVID survey] stuff and the community attitude stuff and people's tolerance for how much longer they're going to put up with this was all important, but framed against the epidemiological advice being the most important thing...How it all got worked out that the epidemiological health data and the public attitudes data all went into the mix in those decisions. Not formally, but you would be aware of the epidemiological stuff would be formally dealt with because it was new, it was super red hot, it would literally come off the printer from the day before. Whereas the kind of ... [POD] stuff was long-term trends, consistent sort of background to it.” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

“There was a constant source of many, many different inputs into COVID-19 policies. So there's not a direct link, but it was useful to inform us in terms of attitudes and impacts of the public health measures that we were putting forward... [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“I also reckon it probably can't ever stand by itself. I think you'd always put it with at least one or more of those other things so that we're not just proceeding on the basis of opinion.” [Participant 8, Senior Public Servant]

“[W]e were definitely hearing it regularly come up in high level meetings that were happening between the Department, and others in their response later in the pandemic. I mean there were stats ... that were even being mentioned by ... the chief health officer in press releases. And then eventually, it got pulled into a cabinet and confidence document and was regularly being read by all the cabinet members, their private officers and other decision makers to inform decisions around obviously changing of settings and things like that. It's not to say it was the only input, but yeah, in that sense it was definitely one that was in high demands.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

Transparency on the Uptake and Influence of Public Opinion Data

On the other hand, the use of POD is rarely acknowledged. As an example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant 6 [Senior Public Servant] highlighted, *“POD was not acknowledged in Cabinet meetings even though Premiers were incorporating it heavily into their responses.”* This suggests a degree of secrecy surrounding the acknowledgment of POD's influence in decision-making processes, despite its widespread utilisation.

“[D]id you assume that every single person sitting around that table had the equivalent [POD] briefings and background and data? Yes. You just assumed they did, and the way people spoke, you kind of assumed they did as well. It was just a given that you wouldn't walk in unarmed to those kind of conversations without that as an array of one of the array of issues. And at that time, never the dominant one, but one you had to be mindful of.” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

“There was clearly a determination somewhere that you don't want to indicate it's anything other than the health advice as an input ... it would've been good to have recognised that it was more nuanced than just the public health advice.” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

The following quotes from various participants underscore the complexities and varied perspectives surrounding the transparent use of POD in policymaking. These insights highlight both the necessity of transparency for enhancing accountability and public trust, and the challenges in consistent

application and disclosure, influenced by operational constraints and the discretion of decision-makers:

“Why wouldn't you, for example, publish the paper that said, when we spoke to people about family violence, we found that a couple of the really big concerns they had was the impact on children in the home?” [Participant 1, Social Researcher]

“[T]hen I think we run the risk of being too twitchy about the idea that we've been researching things and we've been coming up with options and ideas. Now there's at least two parties to that, and I'm sure some ministers would be horrified if that was the practice too often, but ultimately it's public money and the absence of an ability to clearly explain the purpose for which we conducted some research leaves open the insinuation that it was for some nefarious purpose.” [Participant 8, Senior Public Servant]

“Ministers would make decisions about what they wanted and prime ministers about what they want to disclose as the supporting evidence for a policy position. And they may wish that the public opinion data may be a really big part of that. We're making this change because you've told us, I've got this piece of public opinion data that says you've told us you want that to change. So that may be a situation where a minister wants that to feature really heavily” [Participant 6, Senior Public Servant]

“We have done a consumer survey and we will publish that as part of the final report. We will, I'm just thinking, yeah, we will probably put it in an appendix to show this is what we asked and this is what we were told. So we do seek to share it when we can, but it depends on what the purpose of it is in terms of whether or not you can put it into the public domain.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

According to respondents, opacity can stem from several factors, including strategic political considerations, bureaucratic challenges, and concerns over data sensitivity. These constraints can lead decision-makers to withhold or selectively disclose POD findings, impacting the integrity and public trust in the policymaking process. The following quotes explore these themes further, providing insight into the practical and ethical dilemmas faced by those handling POD:

“[I]f you're doing something that's overwhelmingly positively received but you want to keep an eye on it, then I think governments generally will be more happy with doing a survey and publishing the results of the survey. The more contentious it is, the more guarded the process will be. And that's in a political environment. ... there will always be some political overlay on things and it depends on the government and the community at the time as to how strong that is in influencing the appetite for doing some of these things and how transparent they can be.” [Participant 3, Senior Public Servant]

“[S]ometimes when things are hotly contested and particularly when there's an active protagonist, an antagonist, why would I give my opponents my strategic proposition? They're going to figure it out soon enough, but I wouldn't give it to a second sooner than I could.” [Participant 1, Social Researcher]

Some interviewees noted that the disclosure of POD use may stem from concerns about negative perceptions, with the media sometimes framing its use as merely for public relations purposes rather than genuine policy consideration:

“[E]very day you've got to stand up in front of those journalists during covid...and then you're accused falsely of making public policy solely on the basis of PR feedback.” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

“[Y]ou want advice to be public and accessible and transparent, but if it leads people to avoid seeking that advice or avoiding writing it down because the political people are going to be worried that if the bad results or numbers or opinions get out in the public that it's going to lead to a slew of Herald Sun articles and really sink potential reform or kind of, yeah, so it potentially shy people away from it.” [Participant 2, Social Researcher]

Despite these challenges, there was a consensus among participants that POD plays a crucial role in policymaking and that its significance should be duly recognised and acknowledged.

“I think public opinion data is a consumer engagement mechanism, but ...the temptation sometimes is to use it to tick a consumer engagement box. So if we're going to do it, do it meaningfully, use it and be transparent about it.” [Participant 7, Senior Public Servant]

“[I]t should be used, it should be relied on and it should be put into the policy design mix that then informs decision makers around actions that they should take.” [Participant 5, Senior Public Servant]

“[T]he traditional way the State gets things done is through coercion. And that's probably not a great model for our system of government ... So the acknowledgement and engagement of the governed when policy serves an increasingly diverse and differentiated community makes this kind of work even more important because the alternative is anti-democratic repressive, coercive measures. It is a tool of a democratic state, but all tools can be misused.” [Participant 4, Former Minister]

VI. Conclusion

The practice review underscored the role of POD as a tool in democratic governance. Identified use cases of POD highlight its utility in understanding community beliefs to inform policy development, crafting strategies to influence public behaviour and attitudes, and testing the social licence of policy initiatives to ensure they are both socially feasible and sustainable.

During the COVID-19 crisis, POD proved invaluable not only in addressing immediate challenges but also in enabling a nuanced response to diverse community needs and contentious issues. While it was neither the sole nor the primary evidence input, our interviews identified cases where POD significantly shaped implementation and communication strategies. Interviewees noted that the uncertainty and dynamic environment of the pandemic allowed for more systematic collection of POD, effectively shaping the government's response beyond usual business contexts.

Our interviews emphasised that the process of designing, collecting, and disseminating POD is critical. There must be a strong focus on clearly defining objectives, engaging key stakeholders, and ensuring methodological rigour to make POD fit for purpose and its insights actionable.

The interviews also shed light on the practical challenges in the use of POD, particularly the risk of politicisation. Although the theoretical purpose of POD is well-defined, its practical application can raise perceived tensions between its impartial use for policy development and its political use. This often results in a lack of transparency in how POD is utilised and reported. Moreover, political considerations may deter ministers from using or disseminating POD. For instance, participants noted that during the COVID-19 context, the use of POD was rarely publicly recognised as an evidence input in decision-making. These findings underscore the necessity to foster a deeper understanding of how to effectively integrate and acknowledge POD in public decision-making processes.

Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview framework

Opening statement

- Check consent for interview; Are you happy for us to commence recording now?

This interview focuses on the role of public opinion data in policymaking in a crisis context. We have defined POD as the aggregate of individual attitudes, self reported behaviours and opinions on a particular topic that is representative of a particular community or population. As you are aware, we are interviewing a small number of senior decision-makers to understand the role of POD in policymaking with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. This will help us to understand how these experiences may apply more generally in a crisis context.

Do you have any questions or reflections before we begin?

Interview Outline (based on a 45 min interview)

1. Briefly describe your role and experience in the area of policymaking
(prompt if required) What was your role during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. In your experience how is POD used in policymaking?
3. What do you see as the purpose and benefits of using POD in policy decision-making?
 - (if not covered) What value does POD add to the policy process?
 - When and under what circumstances are decision makers more receptive to POD insights
4. Can you provide examples of a policy-making decision (or decisions) in the context of COVID-19 where POD was considered in the decision-making process?
5. What was the type of POD data that was used in this case?
6. Were you involved in the decision to collect the POD?
If yes: What problem was it trying to solve? Did you have involvement in the design, collection, analysis or presentation of the POD? How was POD presented to you?/Who presented it (e.g. staff, researcher, pod expert..)
If no: Where did the POD idea originate and what problem was it trying to solve? How was POD presented to you?
7. In what ways did POD complement (or conflict with) other types of data and information you were using to make decisions during the pandemic?
(if not covered) How influential was POD relative to other inputs?
8. What were the challenges you faced in using POD effectively?
(if not covered) Were there any unexpected outcomes of using POD?
9. Can you share any lessons learned from using POD that could be applied to future crises?

10. Do you think that the use of POD varies in *crisis vs. non-crisis* situations (i.e. 'business as usual') (if not covered) What types of decisions are best suited to the use of POD?

Where is POD less helpful?

11. [if time] We found in the literature review that the specific influence of POD on policymaking was poorly described. How do you think transparent reporting of the use of POD can be balanced against the need to protect confidential aspects of the policymaking process?

12. Is there anything you would like to say before we end the interview that has not been covered?

Appendix 2: Summary of qualitative themes identified

Theme (Researcher: PB)	Related theme(s) (Researcher: AM)
Criteria for collecting POD	<i>The Role of POD</i>
POD to understand beliefs and attitudes	<i>Purpose of POD (why)</i>
POD to influence beliefs and attitudes	
POD to gather knowledge	
Role of federation and state	Key Conditions for POD influence
Politicians vs. public servant role	Purpose of POD
Limitations of POD	Key Conditions for POD influence
POD design and collection [Subtheme: description of POD data]	<i>Fit for purpose</i> <i>Aligning POD with policy needs</i> <i>Clarity of Objectives</i> <i>Actionable at the onset</i>
Non POD inputs [Subtheme: social media]	
Commissioning of POD	Design, Collection and Dissemination Process/Collaborations/Capability issues
Credibility of POD	<i>Credibility and Soundness</i>
POD analysis and dissemination	Design, Collection and Dissemination Process
	Collaborations/Capability issues
How COVID POD was used	<i>Role of POD</i>
How POD is used generally	<i>Extent to Which Insights Informed Decisions</i> <i>Impact Examples</i> <i>POD in crisis contexts</i>
Issues framing	Transparency