

Public Opinion

Narcissus was captivated by his reflection in a pool; Americans today seem obsessed with their reflections in the polls. Opinion surveys have been conducted on a “scientific” basis for more than 40 years. They are widely used by academics, corporations, politicians. Yet contradictions and imponderables remain. What effect do polls have on political life? When should they be trusted? How useful are they? “The people’s voice is odd,” Alexander Pope once wrote. Here *Public Opinion* editors David Gergen and William Schambra look at polling’s past and present; and analyst Everett Carl Ladd, Jr. offers his views on what Americans are thinking—and how their thinking has changed.



POLLSTERS AND POLLING

by David Gergen and William Schambra

America, so it seems, is under siege. Armies of men and women, equipped with clipboards and pencils, sweep across the land, prying and probing into people’s minds. The results are served up in hundreds of public opinion surveys for newspapers, TV networks, corporate managers, cabinet officers, and White House staffers.

Consider just a few of the questions that have been put to people in recent months:

¶ Do you believe in Unidentified Flying Objects? George Gallup recently asked. (Fifty-seven percent now say yes, compared to only 46 percent 12 years ago.)

¶ What food do you like best? That question came from Burns Roper, who found 61 percent naming American food, only 9 percent selecting French.

¶ Which is stronger, Louis Harris wanted to know, the

United States or the Soviet Union? (For the first time in history, a plurality of Americans say the Russians are second to none.)

¶ Will you wind up in heaven or hell? The Iowa Poll found that nearly all Iowans believe they will be saved, but one-third of them describe a neighbor as a “sure bet” for hell.*

The only question pollsters rarely seem to ask is: What do you think of polls? Proctor and Gamble did ask once. It found that people had less confidence in pollsters than in the military or organized labor but more than in the President or Congress. Hardly a ringing vote of confidence, but even George Gallup, the dean of the profession, would argue that some skepticism is justified. Too often poll results are distorted or misinterpreted. In 1972, for example, an early *Boston Globe* survey showed Edmund Muskie leading George McGovern in the New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary, 65 to 18 percent. Although preprimary polls are notoriously unreliable, some reporters seized upon the 65 percent figure as Muskie’s benchmark. When the Maine Senator defeated McGovern by a tidy 46 to 37 percent, McGovern, not Muskie, was declared the real “winner.”

Birth of the Polls

Although such tales—and there are many of them—may reflect more on the use of polls than on the polls themselves, the surveys, too, have their limits. The numbers are never exact. Slight differences in the wording of questions may dramatically affect the outcome. The forces that *shape* public opinion—Presidents, the media, political parties, “feelings”—have yet to be sorted out with much precision.

Nonetheless, the polls deserve to be studied with care. There

*The Gallup poll on UFOs was taken March 3–6, 1978. The food survey is from *Roper Reports*, 78-9, September 23–30, 1978. For surveys on the relative strengths of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., see Harris surveys taken in December 1976 and July and November 1978. The Iowa Poll was taken in August 1977.

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are many reputable surveys; when read properly, they can tell us much. Even misinterpreted polls deserve our attention if their findings are widely heeded. In short, the polls, like television, have taken too firm a grip on our perceptions to be ignored.

America's current interest in polls has deep historical roots. Driven by the practical needs of politicians in search of voters, newspapers in search of readers, and businessmen in search of customers, Americans have been taking surveys for more than 150 years. The first political poll was published in 1824, after the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* surveyed the citizens of Wilmington, Delaware, "without Discrimination of Parties," on their preference for President. It showed Andrew Jackson was the two-to-one favorite over John Quincy Adams. The *Raleigh* (North Carolina) *Star* later showed Jackson with a seven-to-one lead. Old Hickory lost the election, however, and would probably have scoffed at the "bandwagon" theory—the controversial notion that high poll ratings attract additional support to a candidate. (Few pollsters today take the idea seriously.)

Politicians soon began to canvass potential voters in order to plan their campaign strategies. Political canvasses sought only party identification, not attitudes, but they were considered so valuable that, in 1896, the Republican National Committee spent \$3.5 million for the most thorough voter survey ever undertaken. Long after 1896, Republicans enjoyed safe majorities, and such polls no longer seemed necessary; Democrats were usually too poor to afford them.

Newspaper editors, meanwhile, smelled a good story. During the 1880s and '90s, they had begun taking "straw polls," sampling whoever was handy in street cars, trains, and local taverns. In 1883, General Charles H. Taylor, editor of the *Boston Globe*, devised an election-night reporting system to project statewide winners and losers based on voting returns from selected precincts—just as television networks do now. Soon the *Globe* was joined in the straw-polling business by the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *St. Louis Republic*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Straw polling reached its peak in the 1920s and the '30s.

A New Breed

The most famous straw poll in history was taken in 1936 by a popular weekly magazine, *Literary Digest*. The *Digest* mailed out 10 million sample presidential ballots (along with magazine subscription blanks) to Americans who owned telephones or automobiles—in short, to a relatively affluent minority. But they failed to recognize this inherent upper-class (and Republi-

can) bias. When the *Digest's* projected winner, Republican Alf Landon, came in on Election Day well behind Democrat Franklin Roosevelt and 19 points below the poll's projected result, straw polling was finished as a serious undertaking.

But better days for polling lay ahead.

In 1935, three of the fathers of modern techniques—George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, and Elmo Roper—independently began taking new kinds of surveys based on the “scientific” findings of psychologists, statisticians, and market researchers. Gallup's organization was a direct outgrowth of his doctoral thesis on sampling techniques. (He was also the personal pollster for his mother-in-law in 1932; that fall she became the first woman elected Secretary of State in Iowa history.)

In the hands of this new breed, random sampling and sophisticated data analysis became standard practice. The pollsters did suffer one further disaster—the projection by Gallup and others of a victory by Dewey over Truman in the 1948 presidential election—but for the most part, the industry has been marked by steady growth. In recent years, growth has been spectacular. According to a Census Bureau official, American firms and research organizations spent \$4 billion on opinion polls for political, commercial, or scholarly purposes in 1978.

Who Asks What?

Today there are more than a half-dozen well-established, commercial U.S. firms that take public opinion polls. Among the most respected are Gallup, Harris, Yankelovich, Sindlinger, the Opinion Research Corporation, Roper, and Cambridge Research Reports. There are also two independent survey units at universities (the National Opinion Research Center, or NORC, at the University of Chicago and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan). In recent years, the three commercial networks, along with the *New York Times* (in conjunction with CBS News), the *Washington Post* (initially with the Associated Press), and the *Los Angeles Times*, have also begun national polling, even between election years, and have either formed their own polling staffs or hired university professors as consultants.

All of these represent only the *public* side of the industry.

There are also many companies, such as Audits and Surveys in New York City, that work strictly for commercial clients—advertisers, manufacturers, and marketing specialists. Indeed, the real profits in the opinion industry are in commercial polling. Most of the major pollsters make little or nothing on their public polls but gross high sums for exclusive surveys—on



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Even federal census-takers had trouble getting answers, as shown in this 1880 woodcut. During the Gilded Age, politicians and newspaper publishers began taking "straw-poll" surveys of their own—generally consisting of unsophisticated "man-in-the-street" interviews. Today, the refusal rate for pollsters' interviews is high and growing.

toothpaste, detergent, new movies—conducted under private contract. In addition, they earn considerable sums by providing private (or proprietary) reports to commercial clients on a subscription basis. For example, Cambridge Research Reports, headed by President Carter's chief polling adviser, Patrick Caddell, sells a series of four private surveys a year at a cost of \$20,000 per subscriber.

There are a dozen or so reputable state polls—Mervin Field of California and the Iowa Poll are among the best—and scores of small commercial firms, not to mention the half-dozen major political pollsters whose services are considered *de rigueur* for any serious candidate for high office.*

The federal government has also become a major sponsor of surveys in recent years. Franklin Roosevelt was the first President to recognize their potential utility. In 1939, he signed on Hadley Cantril, a Princeton psychologist, to monitor public opinion on the war in Europe. Roosevelt's concern was how to prepare Americans for a war they did not want.

Under pressure from conservative Congressmen, most of the government's polling activities were halted after V-J Day, and occupants of the White House thereafter showed little interest in

* Prospective candidates for the 1980 presidential nominations have already begun lining up pollsters: Ronald Reagan is consulting with Richard Wirthlin, John Connally with Lance Torrance, George Bush with Robert Teeter, and President Carter with Patrick Caddell.

their revival until the arrival of John F. Kennedy. Louis Harris had served as a personal pollster for Kennedy in the 1960 campaign, and JFK carried his interest in polls into the Oval Office. Lyndon Johnson was a noted devotee, frequently fishing newspaper clippings of current poll results from his back pocket to remind visiting diplomats and White House reporters of what the "people" thought of him. (He discontinued the practice when his popularity ratings fell below the 50 percent mark.)

Today, polling is flourishing in Washington again. Over the past two years, scores of major surveys have been commissioned by federal agencies (though the congressional watchdog, the General Accounting Office, has recently questioned whether officials fully understand the results). The polling industry has also spread to other nations: Both Gallup and Harris have international affiliates (Gallup has 26, from Finland and Spain to India and Brazil), and indigenous firms have also sprung up. Political use of polls has stirred such intense controversy in France that the National Assembly acted in 1977 to ban publication of voting surveys during the week before election day. Authoritarian regimes in several Third World countries have begun to commission private polls in order to stay in touch with—or manipulate—"the public pulse." No doubt Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wishes there had been a George Gallup in Iran.

What to Look For

Professional pollsters are not immune to controversies within their own ranks. How accurate are the polls? How can they be improved? Many of these debates on methods are comprehensible only to statisticians and psychologists. That doesn't necessarily mean, however, that laymen can't tell a good survey from a bad one. Here are some things to look for.

Method of Sampling. A few newspapers, like the *Chicago Sun Times* and the *New York Daily News*, continue to take straw polls before elections. All claim a long record of success. It was a *Sun Times* straw ballot that supposedly alerted Senator Charles Percy to his re-election troubles in Illinois and spurred him into an extraordinary (and successful) campaign effort in 1978. Serious researchers believe, nonetheless, that straw ballots lack credibility, and no professional pollster uses them today. Not without reason: In one recent election, an Illinois straw poll was right on the overall outcome of the election but wrong on every district in the state.

The most reliable method is "random sampling." Working

with census tracts and computers, survey firms randomly select the districts that are to be canvassed, the homes within the districts, and even the adults within the homes. No one is chosen because of any personal characteristic (e.g., race, sex, age, or religion); geography is the only variable. Every major commercial firm and university research unit now uses random sampling.

Beware of Breakdowns

Sample Size. Most national polls include the opinions of approximately 1500 people. Working with the laws of probability, statisticians have determined that, 95 percent of the time, a random survey of 1500 persons will produce results that have a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent. In other words, a survey of 1500 people showing that 55 percent favor passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) means that if the same poll were repeated 20 times, it would in 19 instances show support for ERA between 52 and 58 percent; in the 20th instance, the level of support would probably be above or below that range.

Dictates of economy as well as probability have led to the choice of a 1500-person sample for most national and state polls. To increase the size raises the cost without a corresponding decrease in the margin of error; decreasing the size of the sample lowers the cost but raises the margin of error to intolerable levels. A random sample of 400 respondents, for example, has a margin of error of plus or minus 6 percent, so great that many observers would dismiss the poll results as meaningless.

For the same reason, the reader of national polls should be wary of opinion breakdowns by region, age, race, and so on. A random national poll of 1500 adults, for instance, will include only about 175 blacks; reports on their attitudes will be subject to a margin of error of 8 to 10 percent. (To correct for that deficiency, some polls sample a much larger total in order to produce more reliable numbers on subgroups.)

Type of Interview. The polling profession is divided on interviewing. Most professionals once thought that in-person interviews were more reliable—in part because they avoided the bias inherent in questioning only those households rich enough to afford a telephone. (Ten percent of U.S. white households and 15 percent of nonwhite households still do not have telephones.) In recent years, the costs of person-to-person interviewing have skyrocketed; so has the refusal rate for doorstep interviews (it often exceeds 20 percent). Almost to a man, the pollsters have crossed over to telephone interviews.

The Pollster. One of the most delicate questions in the polling profession is whom to trust. Deservedly or not, George Gallup has long been respected within the profession as the straightest pollster of the lot. While some of his critics claim that his surveys reflect an overly optimistic view of the public mood, the majority of survey professionals place considerable faith in his results. Louis Harris also commands respect; his questions are among the most imaginative in the profession. But to some, his polls are tainted by past alliances with John F. Kennedy and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Harris also tends to be pessimistic about the currents of American opinion, frequently focusing on what he sees as rising alienation.

Do People Lie?

The team of Yankelovich, Skelly, and White is enormously influential, and Daniel Yankelovich himself, a professor of psychology at Columbia University, is regarded as one of the most discerning men in the profession. Another leading figure, Albert Sindlinger, has attracted critics for his economic theories on monetary supply and household incomes, but many politicians, such as Richard Nixon, John Connally, and (reportedly) Thomas P. O'Neill have paid close attention to his overnight political telephone surveys.

Outside the commercial firms, the two major university research units—NORC at Chicago and the Survey Research Center at Michigan—have sterling reputations. Their shortcoming, if one can call it that, is that some of their data only becomes available several months after it is gathered.

Interpreting the Polls. Even if one has a random poll of 1500 respondents conducted by a responsible organization, determining the significance of that particular survey can be tricky. One critical factor is the way a question is asked. In an important 1975 essay, "The Wavering Polls," sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset points out that, in 1953, two surveys taken by NORC showed a 37 percent variation in assessments of the Korean conflict. In August, NORC asked: "As things stand now, do you feel the war in Korea has been worth fighting, or not?" Only 27 percent said yes. But a month later, when NORC asked whether "the United States was right or wrong" to have sent in troops, 64 percent said the policy was right. The second question, in effect, tested "patriotism," not attitudes on a specific topic.

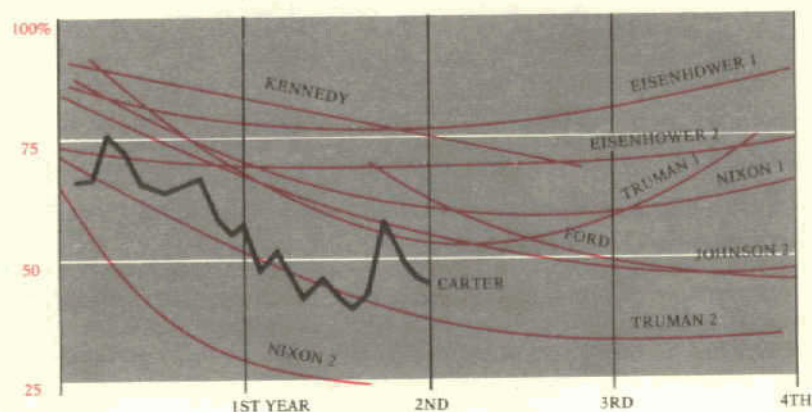
More recently, anyone who has followed the fortunes of President Carter has seen that his popularity at any given moment may vary by as much as 20 points, with Gallup nearly

THE PRESIDENT AND THE POLLS

From 1945 on, Gallup pollsters have asked people how they think the President is doing his job. The "approval curves" (below) for all Presidents from Truman to Ford tell the same story. Each President begins with great popularity; the trend from there is gently downward, with occasional, short-lived sharp ups and downs. Finally, toward the end of his term, barring death or resignation, the approval curve turns up slightly: "He wasn't so bad after all." As added consolation, every President can count on being on the "Ten Most Admired People" list from inauguration until death. Even Richard Nixon was back on this chart in 1977 after a three-year absence.

The upward "blips" in a President's approval curve can often be traced to the so-called rally-'round-the-flag effect. Whenever the President acts decisively or is involved in an international crisis, he can expect a sharp increase in support. Examples are numerous: Truman after the Berlin blockade (1948); Eisenhower after the U-2 incident (1960); Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs (1961); Johnson after sending troops to the Dominican Republic (1965); Nixon after the Cambodia invasion (1970); Ford after the *Mayaguez* incident (1975). Unfortunately, from the White House viewpoint, such sharp upturns are generally transitory and have little effect on the long-term slide.

So far, President Carter's popularity appears to be following the classic pattern. He took office with a 75 percent approval rating that has since fallen steadily—with no sharp drops—to 42 percent (January 1979). On one occasion—after the 1978 Camp David summit talks—his approval rating climbed suddenly by about 17 points, but within months it sank back into a slowly falling curve.



Source: "Public Support for American Presidents: A Cyclical Model," by James A. Stinson, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring 1976; *Public Opinion*, March–April 1978, November–December 1978.

always showing the highest ratings and NBC/AP the lowest. The range reflects both differences in question wording and how people's attitudes are categorized by the survey firm. Harris, for instance, asks people if the President is doing an "excellent, pretty good, only fair, or a poor job," and then counts "only fair" as a negative response. Critics have argued that "fair" may be high praise from, say, a taciturn New Englander.

In 1978, the *Washington Post*, in consultation with Gary Orren, a political scientist, tested Carter's popularity more extensively. The newspaper found that a large number of people had mixed feelings; they neither fully approved nor fully disapproved but, depending on the way a question was worded, could be counted in one column or the other.

Such mixed feelings create a second, nontechnical kind of problem in interpreting the polls: When people answer a question, do they really know what they are talking about? Or do they simply throw out an answer—perhaps the answer they think is expected of them—in order to appear well informed or just to get rid of the interviewer?

No one knows. Yet the history of polling fairly brims with incidents that give one pause. Roper found in 1964 that many people would not admit to an interviewer that they planned to vote for presidential candidate Barry Goldwater; Goldwater did four percentage points better when people were given secret ballots. Again in 1964, the Survey Research Center discovered that 64 percent of adults polled remembered voting for John F. Kennedy in 1960 (when Kennedy gleaned only 50 percent of the vote). In the post-Watergate era, a similar phenomenon attends people who cast their ballot for Nixon but disavow it today. Indeed, if people had actually voted the way they now claim to have voted, George McGovern might have won. He certainly would have carried California.

Views of Katmandu

Our own experience suggests that when people answer questions dealing with *personal experience*, their views tend to be well considered, lending the poll results more credence. Thus, when 54 percent of respondents told Louis Harris in 1969 that drinking was a very serious problem in the United States, and when that number increased to 76 percent in 1977, the change was a signal that something significant was happening in people's drinking habits—or, at least, in their views of drinking.

In sharp contrast, polls that ask people what the United States ought to do in a far-flung corner of the globe, such as

Afghanistan, deserve little serious attention. A large number probably think Afghanistan is in Africa. While the public's instincts have generally proved to be sound over the years, the information base of the average American should not be overestimated. In 1964, 62 percent of Americans surveyed thought the Soviet Union was a member of NATO. And as recently as last February, 77 percent of those surveyed in a *New York Times*/CBS News poll could not identify the two nations involved in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. (Nevertheless, 63 percent favored a new SALT treaty.)

Questions in a Vacuum

Daniel Yankelovich cautions that because of the malleability of public opinion on foreign policy, it is far more important for Washington policy makers to understand the general sentiments that guide the public than to heed their views on specific problems. For example, Americans today are firmly opposed to engaging in "another Vietnam" but, at the same time, are also opposed to Russian adventurism. White House planners would be well advised to take both attitudes into account.

A further caveat is that surveys must be seen in context. A nationwide Roper poll in 1978 reported that in the event mainland China invaded Taiwan, only 16 percent would favor the use of American troops. Considered in isolation, it would be easy to interpret this result to mean that the public's commitment to the U.S. defense treaty with Taiwan is tenuous at best.

If the poll is read in the context of other surveys, however, one quickly realizes that most people do not want to send U.S. troops *anywhere* in defense of sworn allies. A Gallup survey of April 1975 found that only if Canada were invaded would a majority (57 percent) back troop commitments; a bare 37 percent said they would support sending troops to England and 27 percent to West Germany.

Having said this, we have probably left the impression that Americans are now unwilling to defend their allies. Again: look at the context. Any question on troop commitment is hypothetical. Once a real crisis arises, attitudes can change quickly. On the eve of the 1970 U.S. entry into Cambodia, for example, the Harris Poll found that only 7 percent favored sending U.S. forces into that country, while 59 percent were opposed. But after President Nixon actually sent in the troops, 50 percent told Harris that Nixon was right, and only 43 percent expressed doubts. The interplay between the President and public opinion is enormous: he can shape it, but, of course, it may break him.

Somewhere between the polls asking about personal experiences and polls asking about attitudes toward Katmandu are those dealing with domestic issues such as inflation, taxation, unemployment, hospital costs, and the like. These, too, merit caution. When surveys gauging "consumer confidence" show a sharp, downward plunge over a period of months, they should send an immediate signal to Congress and the White House that a recession may lie ahead. But a survey showing that the public, 85 percent to 15 percent, favors a constitutional amendment to balance the budget should be treated with care. People are probably *not* demanding the suggested solution—one they may not have thought much about; instead, they are demanding that their leaders do something, *anything*, to control inflation.

It may seem after all these caveats that survey research can't give us a solid indication of what people are thinking. And American politicians and newsmen have developed an appetite for polls that should probably be curbed. Poll-worship short-circuits those institutions—the President, Congress, and Supreme Court—that were established precisely because public opinion on many issues is ill formed or difficult to discern. Seymour Martin Lipset argued for this sober view of polling when he counseled "humility, caution, and recognition of complexity" for all those involved in survey work. If the public, and its leaders, recognize these constraints, he wrote, we might restore the role of judgment and active leadership in decision-making, "rather than the pattern of leaders following followers, which is currently so prevalent."

There is still an important place for polling in American affairs. In a democracy, it is vital for the elected leadership to recognize long-term, deep-seated trends in public opinion. Are people pessimistic or optimistic about the future? Are people confident or worried about our status as a world power? Are people satisfied or dissatisfied with their financial situation?

Surveys on topics such as these won't, and shouldn't, tell our leaders how many ICBMs they should concede to Moscow in the next round of SALT. But these polls will keep us tuned in to the general level of health—or disease—in the body politic and give us some sense of what Americans will support.