



OPINION POLLING IN A DEMOCRACY

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IN ONE form or another, the public opinion poll has been part of the American scene for well over 100 years. As early as July 24, 1824, a report in the *Harrisburg Pennsylvania* told of a "straw vote taken without discrimination of parties" which indicated Jackson to be the popular presidential choice over Adams. Polls of a more careful nature than "straws" were occasionally undertaken in the early part of the current century, but these did not generally deal with issues of the day. It was not until the mid-thirties that polls based on carefully drawn samples were undertaken on a continuing basis.

The superiority of polls based on scientific sampling procedures over those which relied for their validity only on the size of an unscientifically chosen group of persons was demonstrated in dramatic fashion by the 1936 presidential election when Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Alfred E. Landon in a landslide vote. A Landon victory had been predicted by the *Literary Digest*, a magazine which ran the oldest, largest, and most widely publicized of the

polls at that time. The *Digest's* final prediction was based on 2,376,523 questionnaires by mail. Yet despite the massive size of this sample, it failed to predict a Roosevelt victory, being off the mark by 19 percentage points. The Gallup Poll and the Roper Poll, on the other hand, predicted a Roosevelt victory.

The failure of the *Literary Digest's* polling approach can be explained rather simply. The *Digest's* sample of voters was drawn from lists of automobile and telephone owners. This sampling system produced accurate results so long as voters in average and above-average income groups were as likely to vote Democratic as Republican; and conversely those in the lower income brackets—the have-nots—were as likely to vote for either party candidate. With the advent of the New Deal, however, the American electorate became sharply stratified along income lines, with many persons in the above-average income groups gravitating to the Republican party and many of those in the below-average income groups moving to the Democratic side.

Obviously, a sampling system that reached only telephone subscribers and automobile owners—who were largely among the better-off in that era—was certain to overestimate Republican strength in the 1936 election. And that is precisely what did happen.

In contrast, the scientific sampling methods which were employed by Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley for the first time in this election were designed to include the proper proportion of voters from each economic stratus—not just those who owned automobiles and telephones. These samples much more accurately reflected the proportion of Democrats and Republicans in the population. And the findings produced by the three organizations, therefore, were closer to the actual election results.

The 1936 election experience provides an excellent example of how election polling serves the science of opinion measurement by providing a kind of "acid test" of statistical methods. An election represents one of the few situations in which the figures produced by survey organizations can be compared to the actual voting results.

The progress made in polling techniques since 1935 is revealed by examining the error between the Gallup Poll's final election figures and the actual vote. For the seven national elections between 1936 and 1948, the average error recorded for the Gallup Poll was 4.0 percentage points. For the 11 national elections since 1948, the average error is 1.6 points.

The Gallup Poll and other survey organizations have demonstrated that when scientific methods, rather than procedures relying heavily on subjective judgment, are employed, the prediction of aggregate human behavior can be closely approximated.

The American Institute of Public Opinion was founded in the fall of 1935 for the purpose of determining the public's views on the important political, social, and economic issues of the day. The operation, as planned,

was to be continuous, with survey reports prepared for distribution at regular intervals. The press and the press services traditionally had confined their efforts largely to reporting events—*what people do*. This new effort was designed to deal with a different aspect of life—*what people think*.

The need for a way to measure public opinion had been suggested near the end of the last century by James Bryce, an Englishman who had established himself as a leading authority on the American government. In his book *The American Commonwealth*, which was widely used in American universities, Bryce observed, "The obvious weakness of government by public opinion is the difficulty of ascertaining it." He predicted that the next and final stage in the development of democracies would be reached when the will of the people could be known at all times.

This final stage as predicted by Bryce is close at hand. With developments of recent years, it is now possible to poll a sample of the entire U.S. in a matter of hours. In fact, there is little difference today in the speed with which the media of communications cover major events and the speed with which opinions can be gathered regarding these same events. National surveys have been conducted in a matter of hours to measure first reactions to occurrences such as the nationwide postal strike in 1970 and the Calley verdict in 1971. Also, Gallup affiliates in countries around the world have frequently measured multinational opinion in as little time as 72 hours about such events as the launching of the first Sputnik in 1957 and the visit of Soviet Premier Khrushchev to the U.S. in 1959.

In 1922, Walter Lippmann, in a prophetic statement in his widely read and quoted book *Public Opinion* said "The social scientist will acquire his dignity and his strength when he has worked out his method. He will do that by turning into opportunity the need of the great society for *instruments of analysis* by which an invisible and most stupendously difficult environment can be made intelligible."

The environment has not become any less complex in the half century since Lippmann wrote these words. And the modern poll is at least one instrument of analysis that can and does help to make the environment more intelligible.

DETERMINING AREAS OF IGNORANCE

Some critics have questioned the value of opinion polling, saying that the great mass of people are uninformed on most issues of the day, and therefore, their views have little significance. If persons in a survey feel that they are not competent to answer certain questions or have no opinion because they lack information, they will usually say they don't know or have no opinion. Moreover, opinions that have most significance concern issues or problems that touch the daily lives of the general public. And the range of these is great; in fact, it covers most of the vital issues of the day.

On some issues, it is important to separate informed opinion from the uninformed. This can be accomplished by a simple survey procedure devised by the Gallup Poll. It is a series of questions that begins: "Have you heard or read about X issue?" The respondent can answer either "yes" or "no." If the answer is "yes," the respondent is asked "Please tell me in your own words what you consider the chief issue to be." And the interviewer writes the respondent's exact words on his interviewing form. The next question seeks to discover the extent, or level, of the respondent's knowledge of the subject. The respondent may be asked to state the positions held by various people or countries involved in a controversy, for example. The next question asks "How do you think this issue should be resolved?" or, depending on the nature of the controversy, a variation of this question. The respondent is permitted to explain his views with as many qualifications as he wishes.

The next in the series poses specific questions that can be answered "yes" or "no." Often it is possible to explain the issue in a few sentences (in effect, to inform the person being interviewed) and then to record his opinions. Individuals who say they have not heard or read about the issue are eligible at this point to answer both this and the last question.

The last question is intended to establish the "intensity" with which the respondent holds his views. How strongly does he feel that he is right? What steps would he be willing to take to implement his opinions?

Thus we have seen that not all questions asked in a public opinion poll are of the yes-no variety. Complex problems, as pointed out, typically require a series of questions. But eventually all issues, especially those dealt with by legislative bodies, sooner or later have to be resolved and the legislator must, whether he likes it or not, vote "yes" or "no." In similar fashion, the ordinary voter, whether he is voting on candidates in a presidential election or on a state referendum issue, must eventually cast a simple "yes" or "no" vote. There is no provision on the ballot or voting machine for qualifications or modifications. He can't put his X in a box marked "no opinion," though, of course, he can skip voting on the issue.

In the process of discovering what the public knows in certain areas, it is possible to shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of the educational system which has brought the public to its present level of knowledge. The best way to judge the quality of the product, and one of the key functions of a polling operation, is to determine levels of knowledge and "areas of ignorance."

The survey approach to social problems has been widely accepted. As Professor Kenneth Boulding has written

Perhaps the most important single development pointing towards more scientific images of social systems is the improvement in the collection and processing of social information. The method of sample surveys is the telescope of the social sciences. It enables us to scan the social universe, at some small cost in statistical error, in ways we have never been able to do before.

SOME EXAMPLES OF SURVEY RESULTS

Since 1935, the Gallup Poll has published over 6500 reports covering a wide range of subjects. Following are some of the questions asked in recent months and the national findings.

What is the SMALLEST amount of money a family of four (husband, wife, and two children) needs each week to get along in this community? (Reported: Jan. 7, 1972)

Median of responses (Nonfarm families): \$127 per week

If you had to register again today—or if you are now under 21 and would be registering for the first time—would you register as a Democrat or as a Republican? (Based on projections of the total number of citizens of voting age in the United States—excluding institutionalized persons.) (Reported: November 28, 1971)

68,000,000.....	Democrats
38,000,000.....	Republicans
25,000,000.....	Undecided

If your party nominated a woman for President, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job? (Reported: August 5, 1971)

Yes.....	66%
No.....	29%
No opinion.....	5%

Let us look briefly at some other issues and what the public has to say about them. (Of course the wording of questions makes a difference in how people answer, but the following will serve to give some idea of public sentiment as determined by the Gallup Poll.)

A majority of Americans would like to overhaul the whole process of electing a president; they favor nationwide primaries, making the conventions, if held, more dignified, shortening the campaign, and abandoning the present electoral college system. Long before such legislation was passed, polls showed that our fellow citizens wanted the voting age lowered to 18. Americans favor stiffer laws on drinking and driving, tougher gun laws, less leniency toward criminals on the part of courts, compulsory arbitration in the case of strikes (particularly those strikes affecting the public welfare), tougher laws on pornography, guaranteed work rather than a guaranteed annual income. Americans think all young men should be required to give one year's service to their country, either in the armed forces or in some nonmilitary work, such as VISTA or the Peace Corps.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS OF SAMPLE SURVEYS

Even more important are the contributions that sample surveys of the population can make in the improvement of government. The modern poll can, and to a certain extent does, function as a *creative arm of government*. It can discover the likely response of the public to any new proposal, law, or innovation. It can do this by presenting ideas to the public for their appraisal and judgment—ideas that range from specific proposals for dealing with strikes and racial problems to proposals for ending the war in Vietnam.

More and more, the modern poll is dealing with new ideas or proposals for dealing in new ways with current problems. The poll in this respect has a natural advantage over legislators. It can go directly to the people without fear of political repercussions. It can determine the degree of acceptance of or resistance to any proposal—its appeal or lack of appeal, at least in its early stages of acceptance or rejection. It is this creative function that may, in the years ahead, offer the public opinion poll its greatest opportunity for service to the nation.

In many ways it is unfortunate that modern polls should be closely identified in the minds of so many persons with elections and election predictions. Although election polling is an important part of the work of survey organizations, providing important evidence of the accuracy of polling methods and of progress in the technology of this field, the prominence given election polling frequently tends to obscure the many other functions that modern polls can perform to make the political environment more intelligible. In fact, polls can do things that were scarcely dreamed of in earlier days. For example, the modern poll can simulate a national election by determining the relative strength of candidates, pitting leading contenders against each other, in any combination. It can also simulate a nationwide referendum on any issue of current importance. And the results arrived at through polling can be expected to differ little from a national election or referendum held at the same time.

The modern poll can provide a continuous check on the popularity of the president—a sort of American equivalent of a vote of confidence in the government such as that found in those nations with a parliamentary form of government. The Gallup Poll's measurement of presidential popularity has been used at regular intervals during the administrations of six presidents. It has proved to be a sensitive barometer of public attitudes regarding the president, with wide fluctuations recorded in approval and disapproval.

For example, President Nixon's highest approval rating to date, 68%, was recorded in a survey conducted following his nationwide televised speech in November 1969, in which he spelled out his program for Vietnamization of the war. The President's low point, 48% approval, was recorded in June 1971, a time when the state of the economy undoubtedly was an important fac-

tor. President Johnson's high point, 80%, was registered soon after he took office in November 1963, following the death of President Kennedy. His low point, 35% approval, came in August 1968, when Gallup surveys showed disillusionment over our involvement in Vietnam at a peak.

The modern poll can beam a bright and devastating light on the gap which too often exists between the will of the people and the translation of this will into law by legislators. From years of measuring how the average citizen reacts to a wide range of ideas, it is clear that his thinking is sound, his common-sense quotient high. Congressional action, as a matter of fact, supports this belief; historically, it has been true that sooner or later the public's will is translated into law.

REFERENCES

- James Bryce. 1888. *The American Commonwealth*, vol. 2. New York: AMS Press.
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