

# POLLING AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION COVERAGE

Paul J. Lavrakas  
Jack K. Holley  
editors

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POLLING AND  
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Jack K. Holley**  
editors



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This book is dedicated to I. W. "Bill" Cole, Dean of the  
Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, 1957-1984,  
without whose vision and support we would not have had  
the opportunity to produce this book.

## *Preface*

Our specific intention in this book is to improve the manner in which the news media use sample surveys, in particular, election polls, to cover important social issues.

We believe that, when properly disseminated, information gathered via high-quality surveys can educate the nation (both the general public and elites) and enhance our democratic processes. Unfortunately, too often we see an overuse and misuse of election survey findings by the news media.

Simply put, too few editors, producers, and reporters have the training and experience to be discriminating consumers of survey findings. Given this situation, it is hard to expect the public to do any better. The chapters in this book provide a great deal of information and suggestions for those in the media to consider as they continue to think about how to better incorporate survey findings into their coverage of elections and other important public policy issues.

The book also provides an "insider's" perspective, original research findings, and theoretical speculation on how polls, as measures of public opinion, may affect the public and certain elite groups (politicians, campaign workers and contributors, and the like). For this reason, pollsters, social scientists, and "politicos," as well as journalists, should find the chapters informative and provocative.

Work on this book, some of the original research we report here, and a symposium that brought together the chapter authors in January 1989 was made possible by the support of the former dean of the Medill School of Journalism, Dr. Edward P. Bassett. We appreciate his encouragement and the considerable financial support he provided to our efforts. We would also like to thank the Institute of Modern Communications; its director, Professor Peter V. Miller; and the Northwestern University Survey Laboratory for the support each provided. In addition, we appreciate the



expert administrative assistance provided by J. Sophie Buchanan over the past two years in bringing this project to successful completion.

During the time this book was being put into its final form, one of our fellow contributors, I. A. "Bud" Lewis, died. We honor Bud's legacy to journalism and polling: He set an example of the highest quality not only for the polls he conducted but also in what he expected from the journalists who incorporated the poll results into their stories. Bud worked hard until the time of his death to achieve no less than the best from both.

—*Paul J. Lavrakas*  
*Jack K. Holley*

## *Introduction*

PAUL J. LAVRAKAS

As predictable as the rising of the sun, American journalists know which story they will be covering intensely every four years: the election campaign for the U.S. president. And just as reliably, many persons—including some journalists—complain that media coverage of presidential election campaigns is poorly executed and does more harm than good to the process whereby our nation chooses a president.

In the twentieth century, a prominent part of this coverage has included the use of sample surveys (polls) to generate “news” about the campaigns and elections. Especially since the 1950s, each decade has witnessed newspapers and other media organizations (television, in particular) develop an increasing capacity and willingness to use information generated by surveys as a prominent part of the campaign news they provide—from before the presidential primary season through the weeks following the November election.

This book was developed within this historical context. Specifically, it is an outgrowth of an ongoing program that I began in 1988 at Northwestern University to study the manner in which the American news media use results of polls in their coverage of election campaigns—in particular, presidential elections. The multiyear program has been jointly sponsored by Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism, the Institute of Modern Communications at Northwestern, and the Northwestern University Survey Laboratory.

As part of our efforts, a symposium was held at Northwestern in early 1989 to review and discuss (a) how the national news media used surveys in

their coverage of the 1988 Bush-Dukakis election campaign, (b) what effect this type of news had on the public and others, including the candidates, their staff, and supporters, and (c) what should be done by the media with polls as a part of news coverage of future elections, in particular, the 1992 presidential campaign. Each of the contributors to this book participated in the 1989 symposium.

Several research projects also have been conducted at Northwestern. One was a large national research study to investigate public reactions to the ongoing media coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign. The findings of this unique study are reported in Chapter 7 of this book. Another study, reported in Chapter 10, was a 1989 national survey of daily newspapers about their use of polling for editorial and other purposes. Third, a large content analysis of the major American metropolitan dailies' use of polls to cover presidential elections is being conducted. Finally, experimental research studies to test the effects of various aspects of "polling news" on the public have been completed, with more in progress.

### ***Some Perspectives from Contributors to This Book***

As mentioned above, each of the expert contributors to this book participated in a symposium discussing the issues the book addresses. In addition to those from Northwestern University (Paul Lavrakas, Jack Holley, and Peter Miller), they included

- *Harrison Hickman*, president of Hickman-Maslin, a political consulting firm for Democratic incumbents and other political aspirants
- *Mike Kagay*, editor of news surveys at *The New York Times*
- *I. A. "Bud" Lewis*, director of the *Los Angeles Times* Poll
- *Frank McBride*, project director at Yankelovich, Clancey and Shulman, formerly with the election polling staff for George Bush's 1988 campaign at Market Opinion Research
- *Warren Mitofsky*, executive director of voter research & surveys, formerly director of the CBS Polling and Election Unit, and past president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research
- *Mike Traugott*, professor at the Institute for Social Research (University of Michigan) and study director for the 1988 Times-Mirror "The People, the Press, and the Public" project at Gallup

What follows are brief highlights of some of the information and opinion exchange from our two days of discussion in January 1989. The presentation of some of the verbal record from the symposium provides a brief historical and critical perspective for the chapters that follow.

Before the 1970s, the preelection poll results used by the news media in their coverage of presidential election campaigns almost always came from surveys conducted by outside firms, often hired by the media (e.g., Gallup and Harris). Apart from that source of polling information, reporters sometimes relied on the results of surveys conducted by private pollsters for political candidates.

As Mike Kagay observed, "When news organizations started their own polls in the 1970s, it could be seen as part of the movement toward more investigative reporting rather than merely reporting and/or reacting to polls done by others." According to Kagay, *The New York Times*, for example, developed its own polling capacity to "free" its reporters from dependence and thus from possible "victimization" by other poll sources, including from the results of private polls leaked by politicians. Furthermore, when media organizations do their own polls, their editors and reporters have the ability to ask their own questions and structure the data to meet their specific news interests rather than having to rely on the hope that some other pollster might ask the questions about which they want data. As Kagay also observed, this commitment by news organizations to doing their own polling has coincided with the "rise of 'public opinion' as a beat that deserves coverage like any other beat."

As the senior journalist participating in the symposium and a long-time observer of presidential election campaign news coverage, Bud Lewis chronicled the emergence of the television networks' dominance of election-eve news: first with live reporting in the 1950s of vote totals from "early precincts" through the now-common projections of election winners partially based on exit polls.

As noted by Warren Mitofsky, who has played a major role in the development of valid exit poll methodology, exit polls originally were used to gather detailed information to help understand the nature of the "mandate" of an election and *not* primarily to aid in the projecting of a winner. In fact, the first time a presidential winner was projected in part from exit poll data was in 1980. From Mitofsky's perspective, some print journalists have never forgiven the networks for "taking the story away" by being the first to proclaim the new president. To Mitofsky, this "sour grapes" behavior has contributed to the public's misunderstanding of valid exit

polls, as many well-known political correspondents at newspapers have done little to explain the proper use and value of exit polls.

Public complaints about polls (not just exit polls) and the news they generate may be partly explained by polls that are conducted and/or reported poorly. As Harrison Hickman observed, polling is "a business any fool can get into, and many have." Because of the importance of preelection polls to candidate viability, especially those conducted at the time of the primaries, our panelists agreed with Hickman that it is incumbent upon polling organizations and the media to conduct polls only when they are likely to be accurate and to report them accurately.

A related issue that was discussed, but of which few outside the survey field are likely to be aware, concerned various "technical" aspects of election surveys. For example, Bud Lewis suggested that "pollsters need to agree on standards [for measuring] a 'likely' voter or for how samples are weighted."

Frank McBride stressed the importance of not reporting or interpreting preelection polls out of context or of losing track of the lessons of history. For example, polls conducted early in a campaign that focus on which candidate is "winning," especially in off-year elections and for subpresidential races, may reflect "nothing more than [differences in] name recognition" in McBride's experience. Furthermore, Warren Mitofsky encouraged journalists to "compare change in [candidate] support *only* to [one's] own poll over time using similar methods."

Panelists also agreed with the call for much more creative use of polling data than merely focusing on the "horse race," although, as Mitofsky stressed, that aspect *is* still big news. For example, Mike Traugott suggested using data from preelection polls to help "define 'who' the candidate is in terms of political ideology" by using a profile of a candidate's supporters' positions on various issues.

As Peter Miller observed, "The rationale [for the media] to do polls needs to be more than just to counter what candidate polls [may say]—the rationale should be to help frame the editorial approach, to enlighten and [help the public to better] understand the election."

Yet, for this to happen, the capacity of journalists to use polls needs to improve. To this end, Jack Holley noted that "the sophistication that has developed in polling [methods] has not [yet] transferred to how reporters are trained to critically use surveys, especially at the nonnational level."

As a start in this direction, this book provides a good deal of information about what the media do with polls in covering presidential elections, what effects this type of news might have on the general public and other specific

groups, and how the media might do things differently while preparing their coverage of future presidential and other nonpresidential elections.

### ***Overview of the Book***

The chapters that follow in this book were written by persons with special and extensive expertise on the subjects they have addressed. The structure that loosely organizes the book is as follows:

- (1) What did the media do with polling in covering the 1988 Bush-Dukakis election campaign?
- (2) What effect did this type of news have on various groups, including the public?
- (3) What should be done by the media in using polling results as part of their coverage of future elections?

With few constraints from the editors, each contributor focused on what he judged was most significant to contribute. As such, there is some overlap of discussion of various topics by different authors. I believe that this is a definite strength of the book, as the careful reader can see where these experts agree (much more frequently), or disagree, on different aspects of the use of polling information by the media in covering presidential elections.

Chapters 2 to 4 provide information and comments about how the national media used polling to aid their coverage of the Bush-Dukakis race.

In Chapter 2, Mike Kagay provides in-depth insight on the yearlong election coverage program developed at *The New York Times*, focusing specifically on how polls were used as part of the coverage. The details here provide numerous examples and a model for other news organizations. As Kagay notes, *The Times's* goal was to use "public opinion polling to aid both its reporters and its readers in understanding how the American electorate was reacting to the personalities, the issues, and the events of the [1988] presidential election campaign." Overall, *The Times* interviewed more than 80,000 Americans as part of 31 separate political polls in 1988, most of them conducted in partnership with CBS News but interpreted and reported independently. Of special value to journalists, media observers, and students of the media, Chapter 2 provides many specific examples of text and graphic uses of these 1988 poll results. Kagay also shares an insider's view of the dynamics of the 1988 election, that is, how the polling news documented the developing and changing attitudes that occurred in the electorate in 1988.

Addressing many of his and others' dissatisfaction with the reporting of elections, I. A. "Bud" Lewis brings over 40 years of experience as a journalist and 14 years as director of the *L.A. Times* Poll to the information he provides and suggestions he makes in Chapter 3. His considerable concern about the quality of today's reporting of election campaigns—in particular, the media's use of polls—shows throughout the chapter. Starting with a "report card on public polls," Chapter 3 clearly sets out what can and should be done better in future elections. Of value to all readers, but especially to those with an interest in historical perspectives, Bud Lewis's own experience, beginning in the 1940s, is used to illustrate his points. Also, in providing a case history of what the *Los Angeles Times* did in using polls as part of its 1988 election coverage, his insider's information complements that presented by Mike Kagay in the previous chapter. Lewis includes a section, "Some Lessons for 1992," noting that

it is arguable that public opinion polls may have contributed to the [the public's political malaise] unintentionally, that they were often co-opted, made to be a tool of campaign manipulation rather than a mirror of public will. In 1992, it seems to me, media polls must be more sensitive to an exploration of the public agenda as opposed to the politicians' agenda.

In the past two decades, the projections made from exit polls, and thus the exit polls themselves, have developed a negative public image. But, as succinctly documented by Warren Mitofsky in Chapter 4, the image is not justified. As a leading figure in the development of exit poll methodology and as a rigorous survey research professional, Mitofsky provides a historical perspective on the development of exit polls in the United States and the controversy that has surrounded that development. "Since 1980, it is exit polling that has been attacked. Network critics now say that election conclusions based on actual [early] vote returns are acceptable, but it is exit polling that must be controlled," he observes. But despite the myriad claims that exit poll projections dampen voter turnout, especially in western states in presidential election years, Mitofsky finds no sound evidence that can document any such effects. In particular, he reviews those few studies that have been widely cited as showing an effect and clearly explains their methodological shortcomings. In addition to his review and discussion of these issues, the chapter provides a valuable summary of the procedures that are employed by those striving to conduct a valid exit poll.

Shifting focus from what the media did in 1988 with preelection surveys and exit polls, Chapters 5 to 8 address the issue of what effects this type of

news coverage has on the general public, including voters and nonvoters, the campaigners, and other interested parties.

In Chapter 5, Harrison Hickman presents a detailed theoretical structure for understanding the possible effects of polling news on the public and elites, including candidates, their supporters, and their contributors. Based on his extensive work with the election campaigns of many political candidates and a deep understanding of survey research methodology and practice, Hickman argues that the impact of public polls is complex and nonstatic. Using carefully presented reasoning, he suggests

that knowledge of poll standings is most likely to affect participants with strategic orientations who are unable to reliably predict the outcome of the contest from other information, feel great urgency to make a determination of candidate support, have little if any commitment to a particular candidate, have predispositions consistent with the direction of poll results, and trust the accuracy of polls.

In addition to his theorizing, Hickman shares much of his insider's knowledge of how polls were used in the 1988 presidential election, including an especially interesting analysis of the poll-related content of *Talking Points*, a daily fax sent to Democratic campaign professionals and opinion leaders around the country in 1988.

In Chapter 6, Mike Traugott presents and summarizes key findings about the electorates' attitudes toward the media and the news coverage of the 1988 election using his experience with the major study of the American electorate and the press in 1988—"The People, the Press, and Politics" project commissioned by Times Mirror and conducted through the Gallup organization. Overall, Traugott concludes that

the Times Mirror surveys demonstrate the public's ambivalence toward the roles and influence of news organizations in the presidential selection process, with a healthy dose of skepticism about the appropriate role for polls as an element of campaign coverage.

Noted by Traugott and supported elsewhere in the book is the potential problem faced by news organizations due to

the fact that those who are most likely to be concerned about the nature of contemporary political reporting, the role of polls in general, and the potential effects of network projections are the best educated, most politically sophisticated, and most active citizens. This means that they are also the most likely to make their views known to both the media and political elites and to demand change.



Consistent with many of Traugott's findings, Chapter 7 presents the results of the only large-scale national survey conducted in 1988 that focused specifically on the manner in which the public reacted to the polling news on the Bush-Dukakis election from early October through the week following the election. Here, Paul Lavrakas, Jack Holley, and Peter Miller present evidence—some of which is drawn from experimental methods incorporated into the overall survey design—from their preelection/postelection panel survey of 1,103 adults that (a) the vast majority of the public paid attention to the preelection poll stories, with nearly everyone knowing that Bush was consistently ahead and that the vast majority interviewed before the election expected a Bush victory; (b) most Americans thought preelection polling news was informative but few reportedly found it useful in helping them decide which candidate would get their vote, with the exception of those with relatively less formal education; (c) a large proportion of the population regarded these polls as harmful to the political process, especially the exit polls that were used by television networks to project George Bush as the winner on election eve; and (d) most important, knowing that the preelection polls had predicted a Bush victory was one of the primary reasons that some registered voters did not vote in the 1988 election. Chapter 7 concludes with a challenge to the media to seriously address their mandate to enhance, rather than impede, the democratic process through the responsible reporting of preelection and exit poll results.

Working at the time as an insider at Market Opinion Research, the firm that conducted George Bush's 1988 preelection polls, Frank McBride in Chapter 8 writes about the way the media use and misuse preelection polls. As he observes,

the 1988 presidential election campaign confirmed two realities about preference polls and their use in the media. [First,] . . . there is no shortage of preelection pollings in a presidential election year [and] . . . the use of preference polls results by various media is a controversial practice.

McBride also "reconstructs the reality" of the 1988 Bush-Dukakis race using preelection poll results, which complement information about the evolution of preferences in 1988 presented in earlier chapters. Also complementing the insider's perspectives provided by Hickman in Chapter 5, McBride theorizes about the effects of preprimary and preelection polls on the electorate and the campaigns, at both presidential and subpresidential levels. He finishes his chapter with several specific suggestions for improving reporters' use of