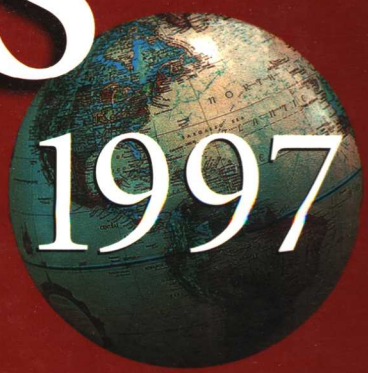
INCLUDES GALLUP POLLS

Where America Stands



1997

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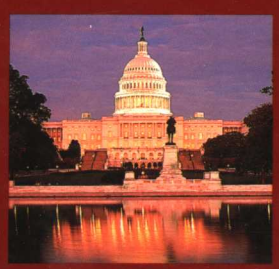

MICHAEL GOLAY

WHERE AMERICA STANDS 1997

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FOREWORD BY JUDY WOODRUFF,
CO-HOST OF CNN'S "INSIDE POLITICS"

A NEW ENGLAND PUBLISHING
ASSOCIATES BOOK

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
New York • Chichester • Weinheim • Brisbane • Singapore • Toronto

This text is printed on acid-free paper.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Produced by New England Publishing Associates, Inc.
Editor: Edward W. Knappman
Illustration and Design: Ron Formica
Copyediting: Toni Rachiele
Indexing: Roberta J. Buland
Editorial Administration: Ron Formica

ISBN 0-471-16183-7

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOREWORD

by Judy Woodruff
Co-host, CNN's
"Inside Politics"

The hallmark of a democracy is that citizens drive the agenda, setting the course for government. Elites, especially political leaders and the news media, can and frequently do shape the dialogue that helps determine that agenda. But, ultimately, the citizens decide.

The past three elections in the United States are forceful reminders of this simple truth. In 1992, voters decided to throw out a Republican president who they felt was out of touch with their concerns; two years later they sent a message in reaction to what they viewed as the ineptitude of the man they had elected president instead, by giving Republicans full control of Congress for the first time in four decades. Then, last year, in 1996, ignoring the wisdom of some pundits, voters signaled that they believed the president had learned from that experience: they re-elected Bill Clinton by a comfortable majority.

The way the issues shaped how voters make those and other decisions is the centerpiece of the valuable and insightful second annual edition of *Where America Stands*. This book is based on the work of the prestigious Gallup Organization, the nation's oldest public opinion firm. Public opinion on every major event or issue raised over the past year—affirmative action, immigration, education reform, and gay rights to cite just a few—is carefully traced and analyzed here. It is a road map to what transpired and why. It also examines public views on some enduring public policy issues such as crime, smoking, and abortion.

This book, and Gallup, are special to CNN, my professional home for almost four years. We do regular polls with Gallup and USA Today, which have much better enabled us to follow many of the shifts in public attitudes as they unfolded. And this notion of the body politic, as well as market economies, being driven from the bottom up, epitomizes the origin and the success of CNN over its 17-year history.

This is not to suggest that either politics or journalism should be driven primarily by public opinion polls: not infrequently they are overused or misused. Moreover, some public perceptions are simply wrong, such as the persistent notion that the government spends a big chunk of the budget on foreign aid. But used and analyzed correctly, polls can give politicians and journalists a genuine feel for where the country stands at a given time and why. That doesn't always produce good policy or good news stories. But there is a better chance of producing both with that knowledge than without it, or, even worse, with erroneous or merely anecdotal information about public opinion. In addition, this knowledge enables CNN to perform two important roles: as reporter of news "from the top down," but also as reporter of public opinion "from the bottom up."

This book is not about dry numbers: it is well written and aided by easy-to-understand charts and graphs. Behind it all is a look at what makes America tick.

Preface: How Polls Are Conducted

by
Frank Newport, Lydia Saad,
and David W. Moore
Editors, The Gallup Poll

Public opinion polls would have less value in a democracy if the public—the very people whose views are represented by the polls—didn't have confidence in the results. This confidence does not come easily. The process of polling is often mysterious, particularly to those who don't see how the views of 1,000 people can represent those of hundreds of millions. Many Americans contact the Gallup Organization each year (1) to ask how our results can differ so much from their own, personal impressions of what people think, (2) to learn how we go about selecting people for inclusion in our polls, and (3) to find out why they have never been interviewed. The public's questions indicate a healthy dose of skepticism about polling. Their questions, however, are usually accompanied by a strong and sincere desire to find out what's going on under Gallup's hood.

It turns out that the callers who reach Gallup's switchboard may be just the tip of the iceberg of those who are curious about the polls. Survey researchers have actually conducted public opinion polls to find out how much confidence Americans have in polls—and have discovered an interesting paradox: People generally believe the results of polls, but they do not believe in the scientific principles on

"The fundamental goal of a survey is to come up with the same results that would have been obtained had every single member of a population been interviewed."

which polls are based. In a recent Gallup "poll on polls," respondents said that polls generally do a good job of forecasting elections and are accurate when measuring public opinion on other issues. Yet when asked about the scientific sampling foundation on which all polls are based, Americans were skeptical. Most said that a survey of 1,500 to 2,000 respondents—a larger-than-average sample size for national polls—cannot truly represent the views of all Americans.

In addition to these questions about sampling validity, the public often asks questions about the questions themselves—that is, who decides what questions to ask the public, and how those looking at poll results can be sure that the answers reflect the public's true opinion about the issues at hand.

The Sampling Issue

Probability sampling is the fundamental basis for all survey research. The basic principle: A randomly selected, small percentage of a population of people can represent the attitudes, opinions, or projected behavior of all the people, if the sample is selected correctly.

The fundamental goal of a survey is to come up with the same results that would have been obtained had every single member of a population been interviewed. For national Gallup polls, in other words, the objective is to present the opinions of a sample of people that are exactly the same opinions that would have been obtained had it been possible to interview all adult Americans in the country.

The key to reaching this goal is a fundamental principle called equal probability of selection, which states that if every member of a population has an equal probability of being selected in a sample, then that sample will be representative of the population. It's that straightforward.

Thus, it is Gallup's goal in selecting samples to allow every adult American an equal chance of falling into the sample. How that is done, of course, is the key to the success or failure of the process.

Selecting a Random Sample

The first 1,000 people streaming out of a Yankees game in the Bronx clearly aren't representative of all Americans. Now consider a group compiled by selecting 1,000 people coming out of a Major League Baseball game from the 28 Major League ballparks—28,000 people! We now have a much larger group, but we are still no closer to representing the views of all Americans than we were in the Bronx. We have a lot of baseball fans, but depending on the circumstances, these 28,000 people may not even be a good representative sample of all baseball fans in the country—much less all Americans, baseball fans or not.

When setting out to conduct a national opinion poll, the first thing Gallup does is select a place where all or most Americans are equally likely to be found. That wouldn't be a shopping mall, a grocery store, an office building, a hotel, or a baseball game. The place nearly all adult Americans are most likely to be found is in their home. So reaching people at home is the starting place for almost all national surveys.

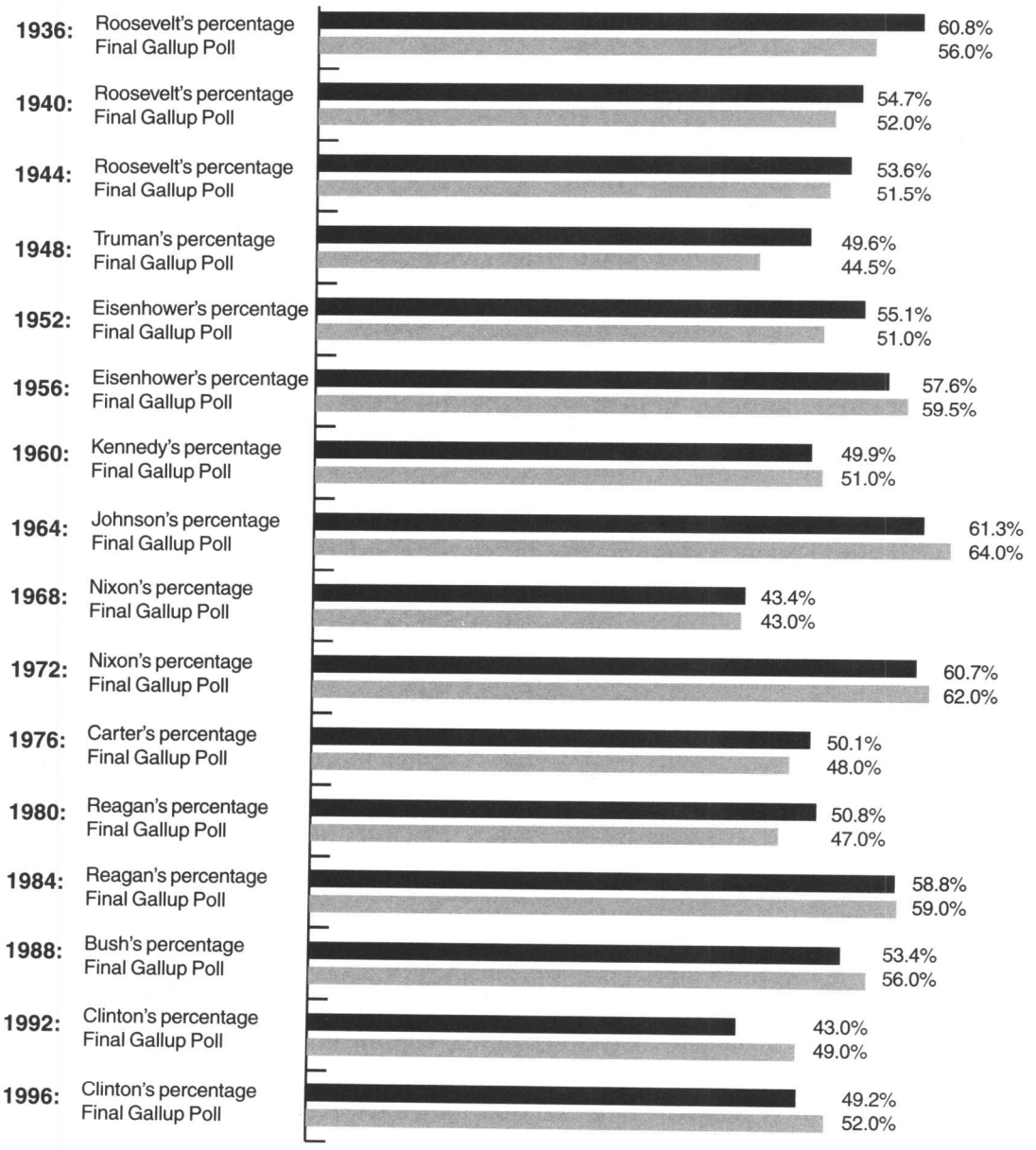
By necessity, the earliest polls were conducted in person, with Gallup interviewers fanning out across the country, knocking on Americans' doors. This was the standard method of interviewing for nearly fifty years, from about 1935 to the mid-1980s, and it was a demonstrably reliable method. Gallup polls across twelve presidential and thirteen midterm congressional elections between 1936 and 1984 were highly accurate, with the average error in Gallup's final prediction of national support for the winning candidate or political party being only 2.2 percentage points. (The average error since 1984 has also been 2.2 points.)

By 1986, enough American households had at least one telephone to make telephone interviewing a viable and substantially less expensive alternative to the in-person method. And by the end of the 1980s, the vast majority of Gallup's national surveys were being conducted by telephone. Today, approximately 95 percent of all households have a telephone, and every survey reported in this book is based on

"Reaching people at home is the starting place for almost all national surveys."

Gallup Poll vs. Final Election Results: 1936–1996

Since Gallup began polling voters for presidential elections, the percentages for the winning candidates have been within an average of 2.73 percentage points of those for the final election results. Here is a look at how Gallup's final polling numbers compare with the election results in presidential elections since 1936.



Source: The Gallup Poll, 1936–1996

interviews conducted by telephone.

Gallup proceeds with several steps in putting together its poll, with the objective of letting every American household, and every American adult, have an equal chance of falling into the sample.

"Gallup proceeds with several steps in putting together its poll."

1. *First, we clearly identify and describe the population that a given poll is attempting to represent.* If we were doing a poll about baseball fans on behalf of the sports page of a major newspaper, the target population might simply be all Americans aged eighteen and older who say they are fans of the sport of baseball. If the poll were being conducted on behalf of Major League Baseball, however, the target audience required by the client might be more specific, such as people aged twelve and older who watch at least five hours' worth of major league baseball games on television, or in person, each week.

In the case of Gallup polls that track the election and the major political, social, and economic questions of the day, the target audience consists of those generally referred to as "national adults." Strictly speaking, the target audience is all adults, aged eighteen and over, living in telephone households within the continental United States. In effect, it is the civilian, noninstitutionalized population. On campus college students, armed forces personnel living on military bases, prisoners, hospital patients and others living in group institutions are not represented in Gallup's "sampling frame." Clearly these exclusions represent some diminishment in the coverage of the population, but because of the practical difficulties involved in attempting to reach the institutionalized population, it is a compromise Gallup usually needs to make.

2. *Next, we choose or design a method that will enable us to sample our target population randomly.* In the case of the Gallup poll, we start with a list of all household telephone numbers in the continental United States. This complicated process really starts with a computerized list of all telephone exchanges in America, along with estimates of

"How many interviews does it take to provide an adequate cross section of Americans?"

the number of residential households those exchanges have attached to them. The computer, using a procedure called random digit dialing (RDD), actually creates phone numbers from those exchanges, then generates telephone samples from those. In essence, this procedure creates a list of all possible household phone numbers in America and then selects a subset of numbers from that list for Gallup to call.

It's important to go through this complicated procedure, because estimates are that about 30 percent of American residential phones are unlisted. Although it would be a lot simpler if we used phone books to obtain all listed phone numbers in America and sampled from them (much as you would if you simply took every thirty-eighth number from your local phone book), we would miss out on unlisted phone numbers and introduce a possible bias into the sample.

The Number of Interviews Required

One key question faced by Gallup statisticians: How many interviews does it take to provide an adequate cross section of Americans? The answer is, not many—that is, if the respondents to be interviewed are selected entirely at random, giving every adult American an equal probability of falling into the sample. The current U.S. adult population in the continental United States is 187 million. The typical sample size for a Gallup poll that is designed to represent this general population is 1,000 national adults.

The actual number of people that are interviewed for a given sample is to some degree less important than the soundness of the fundamental principle of equal-probability-of-selection. If respondents are not selected randomly, we could have a poll with a million people and still be significantly less likely to represent the views of all Americans than a much smaller sample of just 1,000 people if that sample is selected randomly. This is something many people find hard to believe, but it is true.

To be sure, there is some gain in sampling accuracy from increasing sample sizes. Common sense—and sampling

theory—tell us that a sample of 1,000 people probably is going to be more accurate than a sample of 20. Surprisingly, however, once the survey sample gets to a size of 500, 600, 700, or more, there is a smaller and smaller accuracy gain from increasing the sample size. Gallup and other major organizations use sample sizes of between 1,000 and 1,500 because they provide a solid balance of accuracy against the increased economic cost of larger and larger samples. If Gallup were to—quite expensively—use a sample of 4,000 randomly selected adults each time it did its poll, the increase in accuracy over and beyond a well-done sample of 1,000 would be minimal and, generally speaking, would not justify the nearly fourfold increase in cost.

Statisticians over the years have developed quite specific ways of measuring the accuracy of samples, as long as the fundamental principle of equal probability of selection is applied to when the sample is drawn.

For example, with a sample size of 1,000 national adults (derived using careful random selection procedures), the results are highly likely to be accurate within a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. Thus, if we find in a given poll that President Clinton's approval rating is 50 percent, the margin of error indicates that the true rating is very likely to be between 53 and 47 percent. It is very unlikely to be higher or lower than that.

To be more specific, the laws of probability say that if we were to conduct the same survey a hundred times, asking people in each survey to rate the job Bill Clinton is doing as president, in ninety-five out of those one hundred polls, we would find his rating to be between 47 and 53 percent. In only five of those surveys would we expect his rating to be higher or lower than that because of chance error.

As discussed above, if we increase the sample size to 2,000 rather than 1,000 for a Gallup poll, we would find that the results would be accurate within plus or minus 2 percent of the underlying population value, a gain of 1 percent in terms of accuracy, but with a 100 percent increase in

“Once the survey sample gets to a size of 500, 600, 700, or more, there is a smaller and smaller accuracy gain from increasing the sample size.”

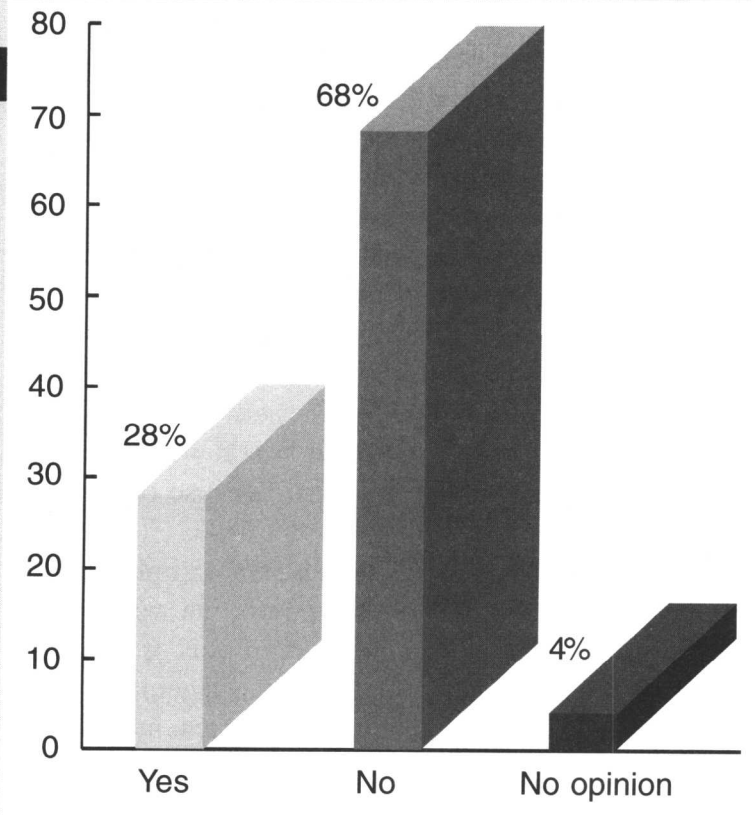
the cost of conducting the survey. These are the cost-value decisions that Gallup and other survey organizations make when they decide on sample sizes for their surveys.

The Interview Itself

Once the computer has selected a phone number for inclusion in the sample, Gallup goes to extensive lengths to make contact with an adult American living in that household. In many instances, there is no answer or the number is busy on the first call. Instead of forgetting that number and going on to the next, Gallup typically stores the number in the computer, where it comes back up to be recalled a few hours later, and then if there is still no contact, the number will be recalled again on subsequent nights of the survey period. This procedure corrects for a possible bias that could occur if we included interviews only with people who answered the phone the first time we called their numbers. For example, people who are less likely to be at home,

American Opinion

Do you think a sample of 1,500 or 2,000 people can accurately reflect the views of the nation's population?



Source: The Gallup Poll 1996

such as young single adults, or people who spend a lot of time on the phone, would have a lower probability of falling into the sample than an adult American who was always at home and rarely talked on his or her phone.

For those households that include more than one adult, Gallup also attempts to ensure that an individual within that household is selected randomly. There are several different procedures that Gallup has used through the years for this within-household selection process. Gallup sometimes uses a shorthand method of asking for the adult with the latest birthday. In other surveys, Gallup asks the individual who answers the phone to list all adults in the home based on their age and gender, and Gallup randomly selects one of those adults to be interviewed. If the randomly selected adult is not home, Gallup tells the person on the phone that Gallup will need to call back and try to reach that individual at another time.

These procedures, while expensive and while not always possible in polls conducted in very short time periods, help to ensure that every adult American has an equal probability of falling into the sample.

"Question wording is probably the greatest source of bias and error in the data."

The Questions

The technical aspects of data collection are critically important, and if done poorly, can undermine the reliability of even a perfectly worded question. When it comes to modern-day attitude surveys conducted by most of the major national polling organizations, however, question wording is probably the greatest source of bias and error in the data, followed by question order. Writing a clear, unbiased question takes great care and discipline, as well as extensive knowledge about public opinion.

Even such a seemingly simple thing as asking Americans whom they are going to vote for in a forthcoming election can be dependent on how the question is framed. For example, in a presidential race, the survey researcher can include the name of the vice presidential candidates along with the presidential candidates, or the researcher can just

mention the presidential candidates' names. One can remind respondents of the party affiliation of each candidate when the question is read, or one can mention the names of the candidates without any indication of their party. Gallup's rule in this situation is to ask the question in a way that mimics the voting experience as much as possible. We read the names of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, and mention the name of the party line on which they are running. All of this is information the voter would normally see when reading the ballot in the voting booth.

"Questions about policy issues have an even greater range of wording options."

Questions about policy issues have an even greater range of wording options. Should we describe programs like food stamps and Section 8 housing grants as "welfare" or as "programs for the poor" when asking whether the public favors or opposes them? Should we identify proposed health care legislation as health care "reform" or as "an overhaul of the health care system"? When measuring support for the U.S. military presence in Bosnia, should we say the United States is "sending" troops or "contributing" troops to the UN-sponsored mission there? Any of these wording choices could have a substantial impact on the levels of support recorded in the poll.

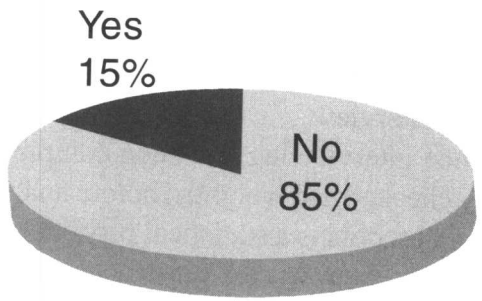
For many of the public opinion areas covered in this book, Gallup is in the fortunate position of having a historical track record. Gallup has been conducting public opinion polls on public policy, presidential approval, approval of Congress, and key issues such as the death penalty, abortion, and gun control for many years. This gives Gallup the advantage of continuing a question in exactly the same way that it has been asked historically, which in turn provides a very precise measurement of trends. If the exact wording of a question is held constant from year to year, then substantial changes in how the American public responds to that question usually represent an underlying change in attitude.

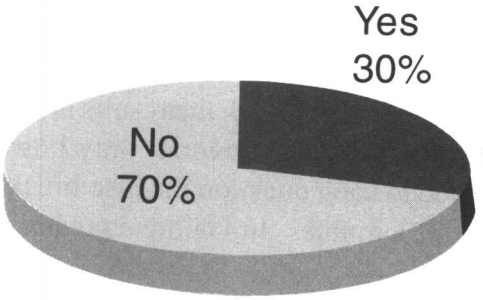
For new questions, which don't have an exact analogue in history, Gallup has to be more creative. In many instances, even though the question is not exactly the same, Gallup can follow the format it has used for previous questions that seemed to produce accurate results. For instance, when

Gallup was formulating the questions we asked the public about the Persian Gulf War in 1990 and 1991, we were able to go back to questions we asked during the Vietnam War and borrow their basic construction. Similarly, even though the issues and personalities change on the national political scene, we can apply the same question formats used for previous presidents and political leaders to measure support for current leaders.

One of the oldest question wordings Gallup has in its inventory concerns presidential job approval. Since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, Gallup has been asking, "Do you approve or disapprove of the job [blank] is doing as president?" That wording has stayed constant over the years, and provides a very reliable trend line for how Americans are reacting to their presidents.

For brand-new question areas, Gallup will often test several different wordings. Additionally, Gallup may ask several different questions about a content area of interest. Then in the interpretation phase of a given survey, Gallup analysts can make note of the way Americans respond to different question wordings, presenting a more complete





As a Matter of Fact

Have you ever been questioned in a public opinion poll such as this?

Source: The Gallup Poll 1996

picture of the population's underlying attitudes.

Through the years, Gallup has often used a split-sample technique to measure the impact of different question wordings. A randomly selected half of a given survey is administered one wording of a question, while the other half is administered the other wording. This allows Gallup to compare the impact of differences in the wording of questions, and often to report the results of both wordings, allowing those looking at the results of the poll to see the impact of nuances in patterns of public opinion.

"Most Gallup interviews are conducted by telephone from Gallup's regional interviewing centers around the country."

Conducting the Interview

Most Gallup interviews are conducted by telephone from Gallup's regional interviewing centers around the country. Trained interviewers use computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology, which brings the survey questions up on a computer monitor and allows questionnaires to be tailored to the specific responses given by the individual being interviewed. (If you answer "yes" to a question about whether you like pizza, the computer might be programmed to read, "What is your favorite topping?" as the next question.)

The interviews are tabulated continuously and automatically by the computers. For a very short interview, such as Gallup conducted after the presidential debates in October 1996, the results can be made available immediately upon completion of the last interview.

In most polls, once interviewing has been completed, the data are carefully checked and weighted before analysis begins. The weighting process is a statistical procedure by which the sample is checked against known population parameters to correct for any possible sampling biases on the basis of demographic variables such as age, gender, race, education, or region of the country.

Once the data have been weighted, the results are tabulated by computer programs that show not only how the total sample responded to each question but also break out the sample by relevant variables. In Gallup's presidential