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Where America Stands 1996

What Americans Think and Need to Know about Today's Most Critical Issues

The President • Congress • Crime • Welfare
World Affairs • Abortion • Gun Control
and much more

MICHAEL GOLAY AND CARL ROLLYSON

WHERE AMERICA STANDS 1996

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AND
CARL ROLLYSON

FOREWORD BY EVERETT CARLL LADD, PRESIDENT, THE ROPER CENTER FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

INTRODUCTION BY FRANK NEWPORT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, THE GALLUP POLL

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FOREWORD

by Everett Carll Ladd
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Where America Stands 1996 should be on the bookshelf or on the coffee table of every politically interested citizen this election year. Authors Michael Golay and Carl Rollyson, together with Frank Newport and his colleagues at Gallup, have given us a readable and informative guide to the issues of the 1996 campaign.

Democratic theory builds on two key assumptions. The first holds that the populace at large has the capability to act as citizens—that is, as a public that decides or sets direction for the nation on the big questions of the day. No question is bigger than the question of which individuals and political party will occupy the White House and hold a majority in Congress. The second key assumption is that those charged with formal governmental responsibilities should and will pay close and respectful attention to what the people are saying they want done. This doesn't mean that presidents, governors, and legislators should do no more than raise moistened fingers into the air of public opinion and then follow the prevailing breeze. It does mean that our democratic idea requires

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that the populace really be sovereign. *Its* wishes, not those of office holders or interest groups, must be controlling.

George H. Gallup, who founded the Gallup Organization in 1935, believed deeply that the American public was up to the tasks democratic theory set for it. Though it is not omnicompetent—able to handle everything in the governing process—it is mature and responsible and fully able to chart the nation's course. Throughout thirty years of study of what the people are saying and how they are saying it, I've stayed with the same conclusion. The public's voice is loud and clear and coherent. The Gallup poll data brought together in this volume provide policymakers and individual citizens alike with a reliable summary of what citizens at large have been saying on key issues, from the proper role of the federal government to crime and gun control.

This insight into the public's thinking and priorities is especially timely, because over the past two decades or so Americans have been signaling a big change in national direction. This "philosophical" realignment is now very far advanced, and its outlines are clear. We see them boldly outlined in the Gallup poll findings.

Storrs, Connecticut
February 1996

How We Know Where America Stands

by
Frank Newport
Editor-in-Chief, The Gallup Poll

Where America Stands views the major issues in America through the wide-angle lens of public opinion within a traditional, "events of the year" context. The writers and editors of this book have used Gallup public opinion polls to go "outside the Beltway" to understand what issues are important to the American people, where they stand on those issues, and what they want our elected leaders to do about them.

The availability of national polls to use in this fashion is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was only in the mid-1930s that George Gallup and others institutionalized the idea of using random-sample polling to create a direct link between the citizens of a democracy and its policymakers. Newly developed random-sampling techniques provided the functional

equivalent of interviewing every adult resident of the country. The polls established the basis for a true direct democracy, with the voices of the people being heard on a continuous basis. Thus the dream of a democracy run directly by its people had come closer to reality.

At the same time, as polls have increased in both number and accuracy, they have become an exceptionally rich and useful mine of historical information that helps us understand and interpret events that have already occurred. As journalists and historians look back on a year or an epoch and try to interpret what happened, they have traditionally relied on official documents, laws, public pronouncements, public rallies, events, and other so-called public occurrences. Polling provides a view of history from the ground up, through the minds of the individuals who—taken together—constitute the entire society. The immense power of public opinion polling lies in our ability to identify and interview a cross section of the population that very precisely mirrors the demographic and ideological composition of the whole country, permitting the pollster to know that within a small margin of error the same pattern of opinion would have resulted had he or she traveled to every home, farm, apartment, and nook and cranny of America and interviewed each and every one of its citizens.

In short, public opinion polling in theory provides a systematic and comprehensive mechanism for assessing how the totality of a society's people feel about issues, policies, and their lives.

The use of polls to assess the political climate—as is done in this book—combines the reportorial talents of a huge number of people who are figuratively deputized as "quasi journalists." When pollsters do their jobs correctly, they pick up on and collectively put together the observations of a large number of observers of society—observers who are living in every type of setting and are peeking into every aspect of American society.

Thus, for example, when Gallup asks a question about how satisfied respondents are with the way things are going in the United States, the answers do not simply reflect the views of a journalist who sits in Washington or who tours the country interviewing people in gas stations and diners. Rather, collected together and tabulated, the responses reflect the perceptions of over a thousand Americans sprinkled across the country, who are taking in what they see from their own unique but representative vantage points.

Polls measure perceptions, and when it comes to human behavior, particularly political behavior, perceptions can be in a sense more real than facts. Take, for example, the issue of crime,

which is explored in Chapter 6 of this book. Various state and federal agencies may report—after systematically collecting data on crimes, arrests, and convictions—that, *factually* the crime rate has declined. But if polling shows that most Americans perceive that crime is on the rise, that perception too is a *fact.* Indeed, it is *reality* for the public, and that reality can be a more important fact to politicians than reams of statistics collected by a government agency "proving" that crime rates are down. Americans' views on their perceived safety and the perceived effectiveness of the criminal justice system remain the best predictors of the public's ultimate awareness of crime and its willingness to do something about it.

Not everyone agrees with the proliferation of the use of polls, of course. As marvelous a tool as public opinion polls can be, they have always been subject to criticism. Some observers, beginning with the editors of the *Literary Digest* in the 1930s, have refused to believe that as few as a thousand interviews could represent the attitudes and opinions of hundreds of millions of people. Others question not so much the accuracy of the polling itself as the wisdom of relying on the attitudes of the common people. These critics say that the opinions of all of the people in a country, even if it is possible to measure them or represent them with polls, do not matter or are not useful be-

cause many of these people are "rationally ignorant": they do not follow national events, do not think about the issues of the day, and in general do not have much to say about the world around them. Still other critics focus on more "micro" faults of polling—the influence that the wording of questions and the order of questions can have on responses, the sometimes conflicting results of independent polls on the same topics, and the occasional failure of a poll or polls to predict an election outcome accurately.

All these concerns, while raising important and complex issues, have been addressed and responded to. Polling certainly has its limitations, to some degree based on the inability of people to always be able to accurately assess their own behavior or motivations. But when polling is used correctly in as scientific a method as possible, it opens up intriguing, fascinating, and deeply illuminating ways of understanding human social and political behavior.

As will be seen in the pages that follow, the country entered the 1996 election year focused on a wide variety of issues, from the battle over a balanced budget in Washington and intervention by U.S. government troops in the Bosnian situation to school prayer and the racial divide underscored by the murder trial of O.J. Simpson. The review of Gallup polling in *Where America Stands* reveals a finely textured view of these issues and events. Polling data

show that the public almost immediately felt that O.J. Simpson was not telling the truth and was in fact guilty of the murders of which he was accused and that blacks and whites had significant differences over the issue of Simpson's guilt. The polls found a very wary public on the topic of United States involvement in Bosnia and the prospect of casualties, but also a public willing to go along with the use of U.S. troops if it was emphasized that we were contributing troops to an international peacekeeping force and that the president had the power to commit our armed forces as commander-in-chief. The polling showed that—despite initial support for the Republican idea of reducing the size of the federal government and for a constitutional amendment that would ensure a balancing of the budget—the public became sensitive to the implications of deep cuts in popular programs, and in particular, soured on the public persona of House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich and projected reductions in the rate of growth of Medicare. In all of these instances, the polling showed how these events played out in the minds of Mr. and Ms. America and ultimately provided a leading indicator of the impact of the events on the nation's long-term social and political structure.

This book is a very useful start toward a merger of traditional reporting with reporting based on the perspective of the people as mea-

sured in polls. The factual background—legislation, election results, and government statistics—for each of the issues covered has been provided to give context for how these issues and events were perceived by the country's citizens. In this year's election, the *perceived* reality will shape the campaigns and determine the outcome far more than the background facts. In both the long and the short term, it is the public perception of events and issues that steers the democratic ship of state into the future.

The 1996 Election-Year Campaign: Background and Prognostication

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

The 1994 congressional election may well have signaled a major turning point in American political history, as significant and pervasive in its impact as was the New Deal six decades earlier. It is not just that Republicans won both houses of Congress for the first time since the Eisenhower administration, in the 1950s, but also that the new Congress brought with it an agenda to curtail the role of government in major areas of domestic policy, an agenda that—at least in the short run—has dominated national politics.

The *rhetoric* of downsizing government has been with us at least since Ronald Reagan's

Favorability Toward Parties

Values represent the percentage of respondents who rated each party favorably.

	December 1993		November 1994		Net Swing to Republican
	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	
Total	72	68	70	55	+11
Gender					
Male	74	67	71	53	+11
Female	70	68	69	56	+11
Race					
White	73	65	73	50	+15
Nonwhite	67	88	48	80	–11
Age					
18–29	82	70	70	60	– 2
30–49	75	67	72	51	+13
50–64	67	66	66	54	+11
65+	60	68	67	58	+17
Region					
East	69	74	68	58	+16
Midwest	72	66	69	60	+ 3
South	75	67	69	50	+11
West	73	63	72	52	+10
Party					
Republican	93	43	97	27	+20
Independent	71	65	68	59	+ 3
Democrat	55	92	37	84	–10
Ideology					
Conservative	80	57	81	35	+23
Moderate	68	75	69	63	+13
Liberal	65	78	45	80	–22

Source: The Gallup Poll

presidency, a period that many people at the time characterized as the "Reagan Revolution," but in reality the size of government continued to increase and the federal budget deficits grew at even faster rates than before. Portraying himself as a "new" Democrat in the 1992 presidential election campaign, candidate Bill Clinton also promised a downsized government, with a middle-class tax cut and significant reductions in the budget deficit. His first major budget effort did, in fact, result in reducing the size of the deficit (although the promised tax cut was not included), but even he acknowledged the deficit would resume its climb unless health care costs were contained. And for the major part of 1994, the national debate was over a new health care program that would have *expanded*, not contracted, the role of government. Because of the popularity of the health care reform effort, even most congressional Republicans at that time felt obligated to pay lip service to some kind of health care reform, although one that would have involved far less government intervention.

Then came the historic 1994 congressional election, with Republicans capturing both the House and the Senate. The Republicans had won a majority of the Senate in 1980 and retained control for the next six years, but not since the early 1950s had the Republicans controlled the House. It had seemed as though Democrats had a "lock" on the House that could not be broken—

despite the success of Republicans in occupying the presidency for twenty of the past twenty-eight years. But in 1994, under the leadership of then House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich, many of the Republicans running for the House loosely coordinated their campaign message under the rubric of the Contract with America, a statement of goals and specific legislative items they promised to enact if elected. The polls showed that few Americans had explicitly heard of the Contract, but the central message of Republicans—that they would cut back on government programs—did seem to resonate with the voters. In a relatively low-turnout election, where less than four in ten eligible voters showed up at the polls, those who did participate were decidedly more in tune with the Republican agenda for a downsized government than were those who did not vote.

Once in control of Congress, the Republican leadership used the Contract with America as an operational guide for their legislative agenda. Suddenly, the debate in Washington had shifted one hundred eighty degrees—from *expansion* of government (in considering Clinton's new health care program) to *reduction* of government. Until the Republican congressional victory, President Clinton had not presented Congress with a plan that would lead to a balanced budget, but under pressure from congressional Republicans, he eventually did present such a plan, and along

with it major cuts in entitlement programs and the most significant curtailment of the welfare program since the New Deal.

The public reacted to the Republican victory with some degree of skepticism. Most Americans supported the major items of the Contract with America and initially indicated greater confidence in the newly elected Republicans in Congress than in the president. But they were somewhat divided on whether the Republicans could accomplish what they promised, and even when major changes were being made, the public did not always acknowledge it. Within six months, the "honeymoon" period was over. Although the Republicans were still viewed more favorably than before the election, they had lost their favorable edge over Clinton and the Democrats. By the end of the year, the debate over how much to cut the budget initially seemed to be hurting the Republicans more than the Democrats, but then in January—after the extended partial shutdown of the federal government—voters seemed upset as much with Clinton and the Democrats as with the Republicans. As the 1996 election year began, it was anybody's guess as to which party the voters would eventually choose to provide them a president and a majority in Congress.

To understand where public opinion was at the beginning of 1996, it is useful to examine four areas: