

# Polling and the public

what every citizen  
should know

HERBERT ASHER

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*To my parents*

# Preface

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Americans are no strangers to public opinion polls. Every week, pollsters sample their views on topics as diverse as presidential elections, mandatory blood testing for AIDS, and tax reform. The results of these polls influence discourse and decision making in every part of society and at the national, state, and local levels of government.

Despite their wide use, polls are not well understood. My central objective in writing this book, therefore, has been to help citizens become wiser consumers of public opinion polls. Because of the prevalence of public opinion polling, it is especially imperative that citizens be able to evaluate critically the various assertions made on the basis of the polls. Candidates for public office, incumbent officeholders, and many different public and private groups, for example, increasingly sponsor public opinion polls to advance their own objectives. Moreover, as polling data become more central to political discourse, an understanding of the factors that can influence poll results will enable citizens to participate more fully in that discourse.

Chapter 1 explains the types of polls, their importance, and the varying attitudes of citizens toward public opinion research. Chapters 2 through 5 address methodological aspects of polling such as the problem of nonattitudes, question wording and question order, sampling techniques, and interviewing procedures. These topics, while methodological in nature, are treated in a nontechnical fashion with numerous current examples and cartoons that illustrate important points. Chapters 6 through 8 are more analytical, focusing on how the media cover polls, the role of polls in elections and campaigns, and the interpretation of polls. The last chapter considers the role of polls in a democratic polity.

This book should be readily understandable to a diverse audience—college students taking courses in American politics, public opinion,

communications, and journalism as well as practitioners in the fields of journalism and campaign management. In addition, the general public should find it helpful in evaluating the methods and merits of public opinion polls.

I am indebted to many people for their assistance in the preparation of this book. In particular, the reviewers of the manuscript—Paul Abramson and Doris Graber—provided many helpful comments and insights, as did Larry Baum, an Ohio State colleague. David Sweasey gave me invaluable help at all stages, and Barbara de Boinville was a very constructive and helpful copy editor. I would also like to thank Joanne Daniels, the director of CQ Press, for her encouragement, and Evamarie Socha for her diligence in expediting this book's production. The Department of Political Science and the Office of the President of The Ohio State University provided many useful resources.

Finally, I wish to express deep appreciation to the various polling organizations that are so generous in sharing their surveys with the broader public and that provided many of the substantive examples used herein. In particular, the CBS News/*New York Times* polls and the ABC News/*Washington Post* surveys have been an essential resource in the writing of this book, as have many of the newspaper articles written about these polls, particularly those by Barry Sussman and Adam Clymer.

Herbert Asher

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# Polling and the public

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# 1

Americans today are bombarded with the results of public opinion polls sponsored by the major news media, candidates for public office, incumbent officeholders, and many different public and private organizations. These polls are increasingly used not only to inform citizens about what their compatriots believe, but also to convince and even manipulate them in ways advantageous to the polls' sponsors. The aim of this book is to help citizens become more astute judges of the polls so that they will not be misled and deceived by assertions made on the basis of polling data. This will be accomplished by explaining in nontechnical language the various factors that can affect poll results, such as question wording, sampling, and interviewing, and by critiquing various types and uses of polls.

## The importance of polls

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But why should citizens become more astute consumers of the polls? There are other more positive reasons than simply to avoid being manipulated by those who use the polls inappropriately to promote their own ends. For some individuals, public opinion polling will be the basis on which they make major economic and career decisions. For example, the businessperson who commissions a survey on customer preferences or the television station manager who underwrites a survey on audience demographics will use the obtained information to make important decisions. Likewise, the potential candidate for public office may commission a poll to assess his or her electoral prospects prior to deciding whether to run. In these examples the polling is likely to be conducted by a commercial polling organization. But if the businessper-

son and the would-be candidate are knowledgeable about polls, they will be better able to communicate their objectives and requirements for the poll to the survey organization and to apply the results of the survey to their own decision making.

Polls are important for the average citizen as well as the businessperson and potential candidate. The polls today have become a major way in which Americans learn what their fellow citizens are thinking. The substantial media coverage of polls provides citizens with the opportunity to compare their own beliefs with their compatriots' and to learn whether their own views are shared by others. As citizens use the polls in this manner, they need to be aware of the factors that affect the poll results so that they do not accept or reject them too quickly.

Polling has become an integral part of political events at the national, state, and local levels. There is seldom a major event or decision in which poll results are not a part of the news media's coverage and the decision makers' deliberations. How should an international crisis be resolved? Should state taxes be raised? What is the best location for a new library in the community? Polls help politicians make these kinds of decisions, and in order for citizens to follow all aspects of the polls, a knowledge of the essentials of public opinion polling is required.

Finally, the role of public opinion polls in political discourse in the United States is likely to increase due to the improved technology of polling, the introduction of courses in polling methodology in journalism curricula, the widespread assumption (challenged by Benjamin Ginsberg in Chapter 9) that polls are the best way to measure public opinion, and the belief that public opinion polls are instruments of democracy since they allow everyone's views to be represented. All of these factors ensure that future political debate on issues will be characterized by even greater reliance on the polls. To participate in this political debate in an informed and analytical fashion, Americans will have to come to grips with the public opinion polls—a useful tool of government and a valuable source of information to citizens and leaders alike.

## **The pervasiveness of polls**\_\_\_\_\_

That public opinion polling has become a growth industry in the United States is undeniable. The polls most familiar to Americans are those conducted for and reported by the major communications media. For

example, each of the three major television networks sponsors polls in collaboration with a print medium—CBS News with the *New York Times*, ABC News with the *Washington Post*, and NBC News with the *Wall Street Journal*. Likewise, the major news magazines often commission polls on national issues; thus, *Newsweek* regularly employs the Gallup Organization, Inc., while *Time* utilizes Yankelovich Clancy Shulman.

Typically, these polls survey citizens about their views on the issues, candidates, and incumbents (especially the president); their preferences about possible courses of governmental action; and their general attitudes toward politics and the political process. Major national polls also regularly cover tax reform, social values, hostage crises, abortion, foreign policy, the budget deficit, and countless other political and nonpolitical topics.

Sometimes survey questions seem to violate standards of good taste. After President Ronald Reagan's surgery for what turned out to be cancer of the colon, a survey commissioned by *Time* asked respondents how serious they thought the president's health problems were and whether he was likely to serve his full term. An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll asked Americans whether the president was likely to complete his term. And a *Newsweek* poll inquired whether citizens were concerned that the president might not "be able to meet the demands of a second term." Many citizens undoubtedly had questions in their own minds about the president's health, and therefore the media thought it would be interesting to their readers and viewers to ask questions on the matter—hence the ghoulish speculation. Indeed, when an issue or event becomes visible and especially controversial, the public is usually surveyed to assess its reaction. Thus, when Bernard Goetz in 1984 shot four youths who had accosted him on a New York subway, it provided a dramatic and salient topic on which to survey a public that was very aware of the incident. Likewise, as the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) received renewed publicity in the summer of 1985 and became the cover story in both *Time* and *Newsweek*, Americans were polled about their own attitudes and fears about the disease and what the government should do. All of these examples illustrate that poll results about newsworthy stories often become a part of the stories themselves.

Just as there are prominent national polls, so are there visible and reputable state and local polls focusing often on specific state and local matters and on national affairs as well. For example, the *Daily News* (New York) and Eyewitness News (the ABC-TV affiliate in New York City) have polled New Yorkers about their views concerning the New

York police, Mayor Ed Koch, the firing of Yogi Berra as manager of the Yankees and his replacement by Billy Martin, the likelihood of the Yankees and Mets making the World Series, and other matters of local concern. Likewise, the *New York Times* in conjunction with WCBS-TV did an extensive study of race relations in New York City. In many states there are first-rate polling organizations, often affiliated with a university and/or a major news medium. For example, the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University working with the *Newark Star-Ledger* surveys New Jerseyans about their state and its government and about New Jersey as a place to live. Finally, publications such as *Public Opinion Quarterly* provide summaries of various poll results.

The polls described thus far are certainly the most prominent and probably the most credible to the American public. Their prominence comes from the often substantial media coverage their results receive; their credibility derives from the public's perception that they are scientific and that the media and other entities that sponsor the polls are themselves legitimate and objective. The factor most critical in making these polls scientific (and useful) is the careful selection of a sample of respondents (most often 1,000 to 1,500 persons), which enables one to generalize from the sample to the population from which the sample was drawn. It is impossible to interview directly the entire adult American population of 160 million; a representative sample of 1,500 respondents who have been properly interviewed makes possible (within certain limits to be discussed later) appropriate statements about the overall population.

## Commissioned polls ---

Polls by the major news media represent only the tiniest fraction of the public opinion polling that is being done in the United States. Many other organizations conduct polls, many of them of high quality, others of lesser repute. Polls are conducted for purposes other than informing citizens. Many clients and companies have questions they need answered and therefore commission polls; many academic investigators have research questions that require the use of surveys. The results of these polls may not receive great public attention, but they still can have an effect on individual citizens.

An excellent example of a commissioned poll is one paid for by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 1984 to study the problem of tax

cheating. Among the items in the survey were these statements to which the respondent was supposed to agree or disagree:

It's not so wrong to hold back a little bit on taxes since the government spends too much anyway.

The present tax system benefits the rich and is unfair to the ordinary working man or woman.

Since a lot of rich people pay no taxes at all, if someone like me underpays a little, it's no big deal. (Sussman 1984c, 36.)

The study found that 19 percent of the respondents admitted cheating on their returns; young, upwardly mobile professionals were the most likely to cheat. The study also investigated ways to reduce cheating and found that Americans strongly rejected the use of paid informants to catch cheaters (Sussman 1985c). Although the honesty of tax cheaters' responses to questions about tax cheating is questionable, the IRS probably gained some useful insights about the magnitude of the cheating problem and the feasibility of alternative solutions.

This IRS study is typical of thousands of studies that have been commissioned by public and private bodies to address specific concerns. Some of these surveys are based on national samples; others are based on specialized samples that are more appropriate to the research questions being addressed. For example, the *Washington Post* in 1985 conducted a telephone survey of university presidents' views on the state of intercollegiate athletics. A recent promotional brochure of the Gallup Social Science Research Group, a division of the Gallup Organization, listed some of the social research surveys it had conducted. These included:

American College of Surgeons. A national personal interview survey of the general public and members of Congress to measure opinions related to surgeons and surgical care.

New Jersey State Lottery Commission. A marketing survey using telephone interviews to . . . aid policymakers in reaching decisions regarding future growth of the New Jersey State Lottery.

Federal Energy Administration. A series of personal interview surveys on attitudes toward and use of home insulation.

Catholic Press Association. A television survey of readers of local diocesan newspapers and religious magazines on attitudes toward religious media.

American Jewish Committee. Semi-annual surveys of the national general public on attitudes related to Israel.

Japan Embassy. An annual national personal interview survey of the general public and mail survey of opinion leaders on attitudes toward Japan.

Commissioned surveys of this type are likely to be high-quality enterprises mainly because the sponsors have a genuine need for accurate information to address some organizational goal or problem. To that end, the sponsors employ a reputable outfit, such as the Gallup Organization or Louis Harris and Associates, to design and conduct the survey and perhaps to analyze the data and interpret the results as well. Many other groups, however, do surveys for a different reason—not to address scientifically and objectively a public concern, but instead to promote a certain position and to convince the public of the wisdom of it. To that end the survey will be designed to yield the desired results; this is most often accomplished by the use of highly loaded questions, although more subtle methods are also used. Sometimes the samples interviewed are skewed to ensure a predetermined outcome. In many cases the poll itself is secondary to the real aim of the group—namely, to raise money to support its objectives.

With the advent of computerized mailings, many organizations have entered the direct mail fund-raising and polling business. In fact, most often the polling becomes a device to generate donations as the sponsoring organization encourages recipients of the mailings to make their views known *and* to contribute to a good cause. Many of these appeals come from political groups, some broad in scope, such as the Democratic and Republican parties, and others more narrow in focus, such as the Wilderness Society, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the National Right to Work Committee, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, and many, many others.

For example, the Republican National Committee in 1981 mailed a National Legislative Action Survey to thousands of potential contributors on the GOP's mailing lists. The survey included nine questions as well as a direct appeal for funds. The use of the poll to generate donations is illustrated by the text of the mailing (see box, above opposite). The Democrats have lagged behind the GOP in the use of computerized mailings, but the 1985 Economic and National Issues Survey sponsored by the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee demonstrates that they too have learned how advantageous it is to attach a poll to a fund-raising effort (see box, below opposite).

Concerned groups and individuals have used the newspapers to promote their views and conduct polls. On March 7, 1983, the Moral Majority took out a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post* on the nuclear freeze. At the bottom of the advertisement was a three-item questionnaire that readers were encouraged to complete and return to the Reverend Jerry Falwell, who in turn would report the results to our

TO: **Richard Richards, Chairman**

FROM: **Herb Asher**

I strongly support President Reagan's program to limit federal spending, cut my taxes, bring down inflation and rebuild our national defense. And I agree he needs my support to offset the power of the special interest groups operating on Capitol Hill.

I have filled out the National Legislative Action Survey. You have my permission to tabulate, record and release my responses as part of the total national Survey results.

Please inform the press, the Congress, Republican Party leaders and candidates of the final Survey results since I believe it will give dramatic, tangible proof that Americans support President Reagan's policies.

Please use my contribution to 1) mail the National Legislative Action Survey to more Americans and 2) fund our campaign to elect a Republican majority to Congress and the state legislatures in 1982 to assure President Reagan's programs are not overturned.

☐ \$15   ☐ \$25   ☐ \$50   ☐ \$100   ☐ \$250   ☐ \$500   ☐ \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
other

I've made my check payable to: **Republican National Committee**

national leaders. One of the questions was, "Are you willing to trust the survival of America to a nuclear freeze agreement with the Soviet Union, a nation which rejects on-site inspection of military facilities to insure compliance?" In case the question wording itself was not sufficiently loaded to generate a negative response, the text of the advertisement warned of the Soviet threat.

Indeed, many groups mail highly one-sided literature and then ask the respondent for his or her opinion. Consider these examples. The Committee Against Government Waste asked, "Before you received this letter, were you aware of the gross mismanagement and waste of funds

### DSCC RESPONSE FORM

I REALIZE THAT ideas are critically important to the future of our Party and our country. So I've filled out my Economic and National Issues Survey and am returning it to you. Please make certain the findings of this survey are known to each Democratic senator.

ALSO . . . I'm determined to help restore the Senate of the United States to Democratic Party control. So I've enclosed a contribution to help the *Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee* build a strong financial base for the 1986 elections. My check is enclosed for:

☐ \$20   ☐ \$25   ☐ \$35   ☐ \$50   ☐ \$75   ☐ \$100   ☐ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Dr Herbert B Asher**

Please make your check payable to the DSCC and return it with this form and your survey in the enclosed postage paid envelope to: P.O. Box 37260, Washington, D.C. 20013.

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in the U.S. Department of Defense's purchase of parts?" The American Farmland Trust asked, "Were you aware of the gravity of the problem of our vanishing farmland before receiving this mailing?" In case the literature accompanying the poll does not convince the respondent of the correctness of the group's position, a carefully constructed question or statement may achieve the same end as illustrated by the following items and sponsoring organizations:

Are you in favor of allowing construction union czars the power to shut down an entire construction site because of a dispute with a single contractor, thus forcing even more workers to knuckle under to union agents?

*National Right to Work Committee*

In his speeches and public addresses, the President has always made a point of keeping the American people fully informed of the Soviet threat to world peace. The Democrats, on the other hand, constantly downplay the Soviet threat. Do you think that, during his campaign, the President should continue to bring this issue to the attention of the voters?

- Yes, the President should continue to address the Soviet threat
- No, I agree with the Democrats who downplay the Soviet threat
- Not sure

*Republican National Committee*

Were you aware that a good part of why America has been leaning toward nuclear weapons is due to inflated prices of conventional weapons parts?

*Committee Against Government Waste*

The Reagan Administration must replace the James Watt political appointees who have been carrying out destructive land policies and will continue to do so until they're removed. *The Wilderness Society*

Teenagers, through the force of law and regardless of circumstance such as rape and incest, should be denied access to abortion services until their parents are notified, or until they have obtained a court order.

*Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights*

Do you endorse the idea that a greater number of smaller farms should be encouraged to relieve the growing burden being placed on large farms to fulfill our agricultural needs?

*American Farmland Trust*

Our nation is still blessed with millions of acres of public lands, including roadless wilderness areas, forests and range lands. Land developers, loggers, and mining and oil companies want to increase their operations on these public lands. Do you think these remaining pristine areas of your public lands should be protected from such exploitation?

*Sierra Club*

All of the preceding items were constructed to generate responses sympathetic to the sponsors' objectives. In fact, some readers might object on a number of grounds to even calling these enterprises *polling*.



First, in most cases there is no scientifically selected sample; instead the surveys and fund-raising requests are mailed out to lists of citizens who are thought to be likely supporters. There is little concern about whether the people who actually respond are in some way representative of a larger population. Second, the questions are often poorly formulated and fundamentally flawed (deliberately so). Third, in many cases the survey data collected may never be tabulated; if tabulated, little analysis can be conducted since the original survey was very short and omitted key questions about the demographic and political characteristics of the respondents.

Orton (1982) has identified other examples of what he calls *pseudo polls*. The representativeness of the respondents to these polls is highly questionable. For example, the print and electronic media often encourage their audience to write or phone to express their views. But even with hundreds or thousands of replies, these straw polls are usually unrepresentative simply because people who would voluntarily choose to participate are likely to differ in important ways from the overall population. They may be more interested, informed, and concerned about the topic at hand and thus hold views different from those of the overall population. A prominent example of a pseudo poll occurred in 1980 when ABC News encouraged viewers to call (at a cost of fifty cents) to indicate whether they thought Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan had won the presidential debate.

Other examples of pseudo polls are the questionnaires that representatives distribute to households within their congressional districts. Typically, these are addressed to "postal customer," and there is no sure way of knowing just who in the household actually completed the survey. Although thousands of these questionnaires may be returned to a congressional office, it is very difficult to ascertain whether the respondents' demographic characteristics and actual opinions on the issues are truly representative of the broader constituency. In some instances the questions themselves are loaded to guarantee responses compatible with the member of Congress's own predisposition and record. This is not to say that the completed questionnaires are ignored or discarded; in most cases the results are tabulated and later reported to the constituency in a newsletter. But, as Sussman (1985h, 37) argues, these questionnaires are mainly "a public relations gimmick, aimed at convincing voters that officeholders care about the folks back home."

Despite their deficiencies, I prefer to include these unscientific enterprises and the more scientific surveys discussed earlier together under the rubric of polling. Citizens are subjected to many different