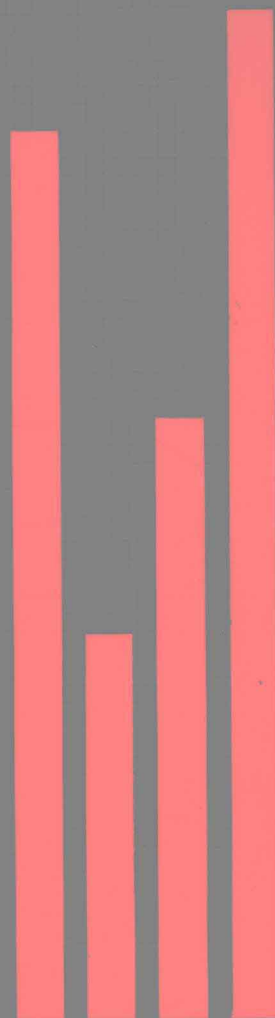
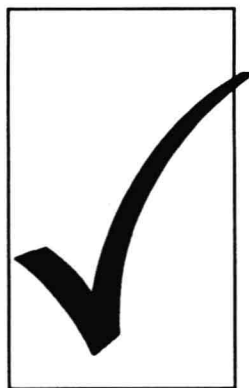


Irving Crespi

**Public  
Opinion,  
Polls,  
and  
Democracy**



WESTVIEW PRESS



**PUBLIC OPINION,  
POLLS,  
AND  
DEMOCRACY**

**IRVING CRESPI**

**Foreword by Albert H. Cantril**

**WESTVIEW PRESS**

**Boulder • San Francisco • London**

Table 4.2 is copyright © 1988 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Copyright © 1989 by Westview Press, Inc.

Published in 1989 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, Inc., 13 Brunswick Centre, London WC1N 1AF, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Crespi, Irving.

Public opinion, polls, and democracy / Irving Crespi.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8133-0898-4 ISBN 0-8133-0899-2 (pbk.)

1. Public opinion polls. 2. Democracy. 3. Public opinion—United States. 4. United States—Politics and government—20th century.

I. Title.

HM261.C69 1989

303.3'8—dc20

89-35021  
CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.



**PUBLIC OPINION,  
POLLS,  
AND  
DEMOCRACY**

## About the Book and Author

What do public opinion polls really measure? Can polls objectively capture and report public opinion, or do they merely provide data for others to manipulate? Irving Crespi, former executive vice president of The Gallup Organization, offers a critique of the polling enterprise from an insider's point of view. His suggestions for enhancing the democratic function of public opinion polls range from informing the public's understanding of polling methods to reforming the ways in which poll results are reported by the media.

This is one of the first books to examine the 1988 election in light of the media's particular focus on polls. It is also one of the only attempts to link technical and philosophical concerns about the ways, means, and ends of polling. Crespi traces the evolution of polls over the last half century and compares their original conception with their function today. Proceeding on the premise that "polls are here to stay," Crespi devotes a chapter to showing who uses polls and why, with examples drawn from business and interest groups as well as from government and political campaigns. A special chapter treats the nonspecialist to a jargon-free discussion of sampling error, bias, and validity as well as question wording and sequence.

Ideal as a brief and accessible introduction to courses on elections, public opinion, polling, mass media, and political communication, *Public Opinion, Polls, and Democracy* will appeal to those in a variety of disciplines concerned with using polls to promote dialogue among voters, candidates, and public officials.

Irving Crespi is director of media and public affairs research for Total Research Corporation in Princeton, New Jersey. He was affiliated with The Gallup Organization for twenty years, most recently holding the position of executive vice president. He has also served as a polling consultant to the *New York Times*, special adviser to NBC News, and vice president of The Roper Organization. He is coauthor of *Polls, Television, and the New Politics* and is a member of the editorial board of *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

# FOREWORD

“The obvious weakness of government by opinion is the difficulty of ascertaining it. The more completely popular sovereignty prevails in a country, so much the more important is it that the organs of opinion should be adequate to its expression.” Thus it was in the *American Commonwealth* that James Bryce framed the challenge of establishing and nurturing a democratic form of government.

Although Bryce never lived to see the advent of modern public opinion research, his influence on one pioneer of polling, George Gallup, was immense. In Gallup’s view, the public opinion poll was to be a foil to entrenched private interests—a way to leaven discourse in the corridors of power with an appropriate respect for the majority view. This orientation has prevailed for half a century as the philosophical bedrock justifying the dogged efforts of pollsters to measure public sentiment.

Yet, some pollsters and many observers of the political scene are nervous that this formulation may be inadequate to the environment of contemporary politics and public affairs. The ubiquity of “the polls” in the 1988 election led thoughtful commentators to wonder whether the nature of public opinion itself was being changed by the incessant drumbeat of poll results. It is a safe guess that more than five hundred “horse race” poll reports appeared in the course of the 1988 presidential campaign, with countless additional polls about state and local races. So many polls, the argument goes, must necessarily affect the way the electorate followed the campaign. And, although less conspicuous between elections, it is feared that the polls facilitate the manipulation of public opinion by interests competing to set the political agenda

rather than remind politicians of the underlying reality of public sensibilities.

Thus, it is especially timely to have this inquiry by Irving Crespi. He brings to the task a unique mix of academic grounding and practical experience. His analysis, replete with anecdotes and pertinent illustrations, is inviting to the interested lay reader. Yet polling practitioners can also benefit from Crespi's thoughtful consideration of the many ways a poll can misrepresent public opinion.

Crespi's approach to the polls is holistic as it explores the reciprocal influences of polling, politics, and the media. Crespi pinpoints the consequences, both good and ill, of the pervasiveness of media sponsorship of polls. He reminds us of the complexity and dynamic nature of public opinion that are so often slighted in these polls. He is articulate on the inappropriateness of a "pseudoelection context" for the measurement of opinion on substantive matter and public concerns as, for example, in pressing for an up-down opinion on some complexity in East-West relations as though a vote on the issue were at hand.

Crespi offers sensible recommendations as to how the polls can do a better job capturing the many and changing dimensions of public opinion. Yet, in the end, he is not sanguine that incentives exist for media-sponsored polls—the most visible forms of opinion measurement—to improve much in the years ahead.

So, Lord Bryce's quandary remains with us. But the reader of these pages will come away with a deeper and more subtle understanding of what it will take for the polls truly to serve the democratic process.

*Albert H. Cantril*  
*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	ix
<i>Foreword, Albert H. Cantril</i>	xi
□ 1	
<b>POLLS AND PUBLIC OPINION</b>	1
Three Types of Criticisms of Polls • 2	
The Role of Public Opinion in Representative Democracies • 3	
The Debate About Polls as Valid Measures of Public Opinion • 5	
Populism, Mass Society, and Polls • 7	
Political Linkage in Mass Society • 10	
The Plan of This Book • 12	
□ 2	
<b>HOW POLLS ARE USED</b>	15
Preelection Polls • 16	
Polls as Political Intelligence • 20	
Polls and Policymaking • 28	
Polls in Authoritarian Societies • 44	
Conclusion • 46	
□ 3	
<b>THE METHODOLOGY AND MEANING OF POLLS</b>	47
The Predictive Accuracy of Preelection Polls • 48	
Early Polls, Volatility, and Diagnostics • 57	
Polling on Issues Versus Behavioral Intentions • 65	



Question Order • 69  
General Versus Specific Opinions • 70  
Sensitivity to Variations in Question Wording • 71  
Single Versus Multiple Questions • 73  
Awareness and Involvement • 78  
Generalized Sentiment Versus Committed Opinion • 80  
Technical Terminology • 81  
Questionnaire Structure • 82  
The Multidimensionality of Issues • 83  
Movements in Opinion • 84  
The Nature of Public Opinion as Measured by Polls • 89  
Conclusion • 90

□ 4

**POLLS, NEWS MEDIA, AND PUBLIC DEBATE** 93  
Issues in Reporting Poll Results • 94  
The Contribution of Polls to Public Debate • 101  
The Role of the News Media • 107  
The Background-News Model • 117  
The Investigative-Reporting Model • 122  
Formats for Reporting Polls • 123  
Conclusion • 130

□ 5

**POLLS IN THE SERVICE OF DEMOCRACY** 131

*Notes* 135  
*Index* 144

# TABLES AND FIGURES

## Tables

2.1	Early Gallup questions designed to measure political strength in nonelection years	17
3.1	Accuracy of 423 preelection polls	52
3.2	Allowance for sampling error for selected poll results at the 95 in 100 confidence level	54
3.3	Variability in national poll measures of voter preference between Bush and Dukakis	60
3.4	Liberalism-conservatism on ideological and programmatic levels	71
3.5	Effect of question wording on approval of impeaching Richard Nixon in polls conducted in November 1973	72
4.1	Identifying the "mandate" of the 1988 presidential election	120
4.2	<i>The New York Times</i> /CBS NEWS Poll: Portrait of the electorate	126

**Figures**

3.1	Approval of USSR and communism	85
3.2	Approval of Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966–1967	87
3.3	Approval of Lyndon B. Johnson, using selected polling dates: I	88
3.4	Approval of Lyndon B. Johnson, using selected polling dates: II	88



# POLLS AND PUBLIC OPINION

*What I want is to get done what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly.*

—Abraham Lincoln

*The study of public opinion has developed from a glorified kind of fortunetelling into a practical way of learning what the nation thinks.*

—George Gallup and Saul Rae

Public opinion polling as we know it today came into being in the middle of the 1930s. In 1935, George Gallup, a former Iowa journalism professor who had come to New York to head the research department of the advertising agency Young and Rubicam, founded the American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup Poll), a syndicated newspaper feature based on periodic national samplings of public opinion. Almost simultaneously, Elmo Roper, a former jewelry salesman turned marketing researcher, was commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to conduct national polls of public opinion that came to be known as the Fortune Poll. The next year, as interest in the 1936 presidential election mounted, the newspaper syndicate King Features asked Archibald Crossley, who as a Princeton undergraduate had volunteered for military service in World War I before graduation and had then become a marketing researcher, to conduct a series of polls on the election.

Previously, newspapers and magazines had used *straw polls*—sidewalk interviews with haphazardly selected respondents or mail surveys of

available lists such as magazine subscribers—to supplement conventional news coverage of elections.<sup>1</sup> The polls conducted by Gallup, Roper, and Crossley differed from those straw polls in that they were based on relatively small but, it was claimed, scientifically selected representative samples of the public. These first modern pollsters further maintained that their poll results—in sharp contrast with the highly personal, impressionistic assessments that politicians, journalists, and political analysts had always relied on—could be treated as scientifically reliable measurements of public opinion.

Since the 1930s, polls have replaced hit-or-miss soundings of opinion made by political reporters and have become a staple feature of political journalism, especially during election years. Polls have also become an essential tool of political consultants in running election campaigns and, to a lesser degree, of lobbyists in seeking to influence policy decisionmakers. Nonetheless, from their beginnings polls have been the target of intense criticism that continues unabated to the present.

### THREE TYPES OF CRITICISMS OF POLLS

Much of the criticism directed at polls comes from social scientists, who fault them for two distinct reasons. First, many social scientists contend that the pollsters' underlying assumptions about the nature of public opinion are wrong. These critics assert that a completely different approach to studying public opinion is needed. Second, social scientists charge that the methods used by pollsters—their sampling techniques, question wordings, and analytical procedures—are defective and/or superficial. Those who make this criticism ask for the overhaul of poll methodology and the adoption of state-of-the-art methods that have been developed by social scientists.

A third concern, voiced by many politicians, political analysts, and policymakers and by some members of the general public, has to do with how political life is affected by polls. The issue for these critics is the *ways polls are used* and how these uses have reshaped politics. Their criticisms go beyond issues of theory and methodology to the substantive question of whether polls strengthen or weaken democracy.

We will deal with all three types of criticisms—the nature of public opinion, methods, and uses—with the end purpose of exploring ways in which public opinion polls can add to the vitality of democratic life. For this purpose, we will seek to evaluate the role polls actually play in contemporary politics (Chapter 2), the methodological underpinnings of that role (Chapter 3), and the challenge of how to disseminate poll results in a responsible and constructive manner (Chapter 4). To provide a necessary perspective, we start with a brief

review of the controversy that surrounded public opinion polls in their early years and how that controversy continues.

### **THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACIES**

George Gallup and political scientist Lindsay Rogers were two of the most outspoken adversaries in the early years of polling. Gallup argued his position in *The Pulse of Democracy*<sup>2</sup> whereas Rogers's criticisms were presented in *The Pollsters*.<sup>3</sup> Underlying their conflict was a fundamental difference in political values that define what should be the role of public opinion in a democracy ruled by elected representatives. Gallup believed in the collective wisdom of ordinary people and distrusted political intellectuals and experts. Rogers felt the need for an enlightened leadership that would rise above the narrow interests, passions, and ignorance of the public at large.

Gallup looked back nostalgically to a time when, presumably, direct democracy prevailed, that is, a time when people ruled themselves by voting directly on all matters—for example, the New England town meeting in colonial times. As he saw it, the problem that faces democracy in representative democracies is how to make the people's representatives properly responsive to the public's wishes and wants. He felt that without the direct expression of public opinion in government, representative democracies would degenerate into government by elites.

Gallup claimed that poll results can be considered a "mandate from the people" that should be followed by the nation's leaders because those results represent what the people want—what legislation they favor, what they oppose, and what policy directions they want the government to follow. Interpreting the intent of the electorate as expressed in elections would no longer be a matter of debate and controversy but something objectively ascertained through polls. Furthermore, when trying to determine the desires and preferences of their constituencies on new issues that arise between elections, legislators would no longer be dependent upon claims of competing special interest groups, newspaper editorials, the mail they receive, or the imperfect soundings they made themselves during visits home. Now they could turn to the latest poll readings to find out what the public really wants.

Gallup further questioned relying exclusively on elections to ensure democratic government, claiming that "Democracy is a process of constant thought and action on the part of the citizen."<sup>4</sup> He concluded that polls can compensate for the limitations of elections in a society in which direct democracy is not feasible. With polls, "legislators,

educators, experts, and editors, as well as ordinary citizens . . . , can have a more reliable measure of the pulse of democracy.”<sup>5</sup>

The old argument that government should be responsive to public opinion in a representative democracy was given a new saliency by the contention that poll results are trustworthy measurements of public opinion. The proper role of political leaders in a democracy, according to this view, is to be responsive to the will of the people and that political leaders should in effect serve as proxies for their constituents in Congress and other legislative bodies. The public opinion poll was to be welcomed, therefore, as an objective, reliable tool for determining the will of the people. Samuel Stouffer, a sociologist who was also a pioneer in the use of surveys to study attitudes and opinions, agreed, asserting that polls “represent the most useful instrument of democracy ever devised.”<sup>6</sup>

Rogers was in direct conflict with Gallup, holding the belief that the hallmark of political leadership in a representative democracy is responsibility to the needs of the commonwealth and not the self-serving wants and often uninformed opinions of individual voters. He cited, with strong approval, Edmund Burke's letter to the people of Bristol, England, the classic eighteenth century statement that in a representative democracy it is the duty of a representative to vote his conscience and not merely to vote as instructed by his constituents.<sup>7</sup> Agreeing with Burke, Rogers argued that we need political leaders who are capable of rising above the narrow self-interest of their constituents and their current but transient opinions, that we need leaders who are motivated by more than the desire to get elected and reelected. He asserted that what we should demand of our political leaders is responsibility to the “true” public interest, not unthinking responsiveness to the narrow self-interests of the voters who elected them. Setting public policy and enacting legislation, he continued, should and must take place through a deliberative process, not by referral to the snap judgments of an uninformed and uninterested public. Polling the public to ascertain what policies it favors, it follows, is an exercise in misguided futility.

Intrinsic to Rogers's understanding of responsible political leadership is the contention that the commonwealth is an organic community and not merely the sum of the individuals who constitute its electorate. Illustrative of this view is the distinction made by the political journalist and philosopher Walter Lippmann between “The People, as voters, [and] *The People*, as a community of the entire living population, with their predecessors and successors.” Lippmann maintained that

it is often assumed, but without warrant, that the opinions of The People as voters can be treated as the expression of the interests of *The People* as an historic community. The crucial problem of modern democracy arises from the fact that this assumption is false. The voters cannot be relied on to represent *The People*. The opinions of voters in elections are not to be accepted unquestioningly as true judgments of the vital interests of the community. . . . Because of the discrepancy of The People as voters and *The People* as the corporate nation, the voters have no title to consider themselves the proprietors of the commonwealth and to claim that their interests are identical with the public interest.<sup>8</sup>

From this perspective, the governing process in a democracy involves a complex interaction among the executive—"the active power in the state, the asking and the proposing power"; the representative assembly—"the consenting power"; and the voters—who elect the representative assembly.<sup>9</sup>

Lippmann further asserted that effective government is based on negotiations between the executive leadership and the representative assembly, with the voters relegated to a background role: "The government will be refused the means of governing if it does not listen to the petitions, if it does not inform, if it does not consult, if it cannot win the consent of, those who have been elected as the representatives of the governed."<sup>10</sup> In contrast with Gallup's conceptualization of what public opinion is like, Lippmann argued that the public is not a thinking organism and therefore in itself cannot develop programs and policies. What is necessary, according to Lippmann, is that "the program shall be verbally and emotionally connected at the start with what has become vocal in the multitude."<sup>11</sup> Although leaders must pay attention to popular feelings, their responsibility in setting and implementing policy is to act on the basis of their own deliberations.

## **THE DEBATE ABOUT POLLS AS VALID MEASURES OF PUBLIC OPINION**

Gallup's perspective on public opinion reflected both his early background in journalism and his interest in public opinion as a democratizing force in political life. He described the purpose of the Gallup Poll as performing "the function of fact finding in the realm of opinion in the same general way as the Associated Press, the United Press and the International News Service in the realm of events." He added that polls "improve and objectify the reporting of what people think."<sup>12</sup> He also felt that while in totalitarian countries public opinion may be



intangible, “the kind of public opinion implied in the democratic ideal is tangible and dynamic.”<sup>13</sup> To him, public opinion is something real that exists ready to be measured objectively. Therefore, if you ask your questions of a valid cross-section of the general public, you have a valid measure of the public’s thinking on that topic at that time.

Even when, for the sake of argument, early critics of polls granted that the demands and preferences of the public constitute one set of factors that political leaders should consider, they still questioned the ability of polls to provide valid information about public opinion. To them, public opinion is a quality of the political environment as intangible as the air we breathe and not susceptible to what they claimed were crude “measurements” of a pseudoscience. They considered nonsensical the claim that tallying the number of people who in a poll say they favor or oppose some proposed legislation tells us anything meaningful about public opinion. Rogers was typical in his assertion that not only were significant qualities of public opinion—such as its informational base, intensity, and relationship to group memberships and interests—ignored by pollsters, but that those qualities are not measurable in any meaningful sense. In support of his view that polls do not deal meaningfully with public opinion, he maintained that although pollsters claim they measure it, they cannot define it.<sup>14</sup>

Herbert Blumer, a sociological pioneer in the study of collective behavior, was more willing than Rogers to grant the ability of polls to measure individual opinion but was equally harsh in his assessment of the meaningfulness of such measurements: “Current public opinion polling necessarily operates with a conception of public opinion that is a gross distortion. By virtue of its sampling procedure, current public opinion polling is forced to regard public opinion as an aggregate of equally weighted opinions of disparate individuals. . . . Public opinion is organic and not an aggregate of equally weighted opinions.”<sup>15</sup> Blumer argued that public opinion must be studied in the “social framework in which it moves,” with a focus on the activities of organized groups that operate within that framework. In his view, measuring and adding up individual opinions, as is done in polling, tells us nothing about how public opinion actually functions in real life.<sup>16</sup>

Other social scientists, while acknowledging that polling as conducted in its formative years had serious limitations, defended the intrinsic value of the method for determining public opinion. Julian Woodward, who served as a consultant to Roper, pointed out that the meaningfulness of counting individual opinions is based on the model of the voting booth.<sup>17</sup> Theodore Newcombe, a social psychologist, concurring in this view, went on to observe that there is no methodological reason polls could not analyze the social context of individual opinions, the intensity