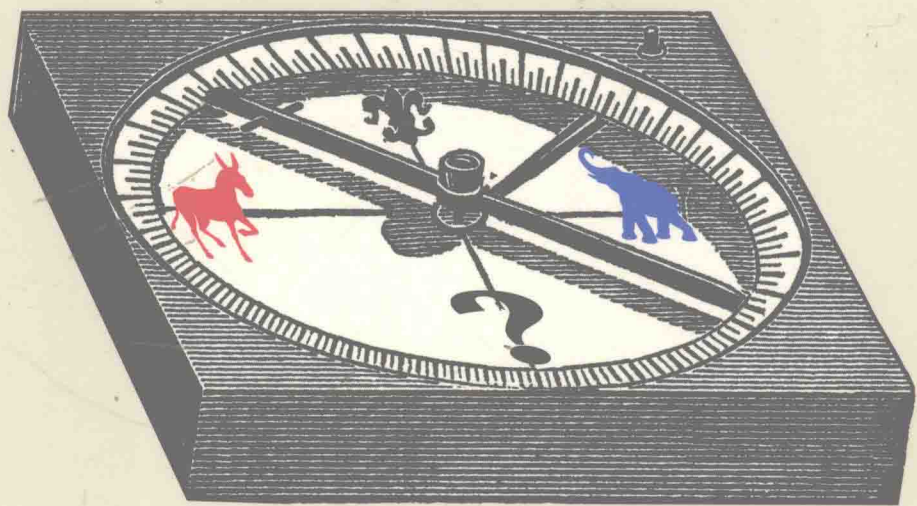


THE VOTER'S GUIDE TO ELECTION POLLS



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THE VOTER'S GUIDE TO ELECTION POLLS

*To our parents,
Fritz and Lucia
John and Catherine
For their love and support*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American politics is awash in polling data. Everywhere a citizen turns, polls are reporting the standing of the candidates. There is a constant stream of “horserace” news stories describing candidates’ behavior as strategic acts prompted by the campaign’s latest polls. And there are frequent expressions of concern about the impact of polls on the public, such as election-night projections based on exit polls that are perceived to have an effect on turnout on the West Coast, where the voters still have time to cast their ballots.

After the 1996 Iowa caucuses, millionaire Steve Forbes was criticized by his Republican opponents and many in the media for spending more than \$400 per vote he received. But little of the same kind of complaint was directed at a new kind of poll-based programming effort by PBS, which produced a short series of programs based on a “deliberative poll” involving 459 people who spent a weekend in Austin, Texas—at a total cost of about \$10,000 per respondent. The cost of engaging in political discourse is obviously not a good measure of the quality of a democracy.

The 1996 presidential campaign has seen instances wherein one form of pseudo poll, called a “push poll” by candidates and their consultants, was used in attempts to sway supporters and suppress turnout in the early primaries. Forbes, a relative newcomer to presidential politics, and Patrick Buchanan, an older hand, called these “dirty tricks”; other, more experienced Republican candidates described them as a standard campaign tool.

Is the average citizen supposed to treat all these “polls” as equivalent and accept their “findings” with alacrity? Or is it pos-

sible to acquire a reasonable amount of knowledge and information about what polls are and how they are conducted and then apply it in order to distinguish the “good” from the “bad”?

This book was written to help students of politics—those still in school and those who are out in the real world but still striving to increase their understanding of how the process of presidential nomination and selection works—appreciate the use of polls during election campaigns. An equally important goal is to help citizens develop a more critical view of how polls *do* and *don't*, yet *could* and *should*, contribute to a more informed electorate and a better functioning democracy.

Our sense of a need for a book like this came from frequent speaking engagements and presentations about political polling and its link to contemporary journalism. When speaking to students, citizens groups, and alumni gatherings at our respective universities, we learned that people are interested in and concerned about the roles of polling in political campaigns and the news coverage that is based on them. Within our lifetime, news organizations have increasingly moved from being conveyors of this information and to serving as active purveyors of it through their own polling organizations.

Polling, the News Media, and Politics

Elections have a special place in American journalism, for several reasons. One reason is that we live in a democracy, and public opinion has such a central role in the functioning and legitimacy of our government. Elections, and the campaigns leading up to them, are the defining political act in the United States. They represent a point at which most Americans devote more time to thinking about politics and public affairs than normal. The election of public officials with broad public support—and the “mandates” that might be involved—is a critical underpinning of our system of representation.

At the same time, elections make great news. They involve important issues and, eventually, well-known figures. They operate

under a system of rules that most citizens are familiar with. They occur on a fixed schedule, involve substantial conflict, and ultimately come to a neat resolution on Election Day with the declaration of winners and losers. Moreover, campaigns are populated by willing sources interested in talking with journalists and having their side of the story presented in the best possible light. For all these reasons, there is a strong symbiotic relationship between journalists and candidates. They rely on each other for success, even though they often seem at odds with each other.

One of their common interests is how the public feels about the campaigns, the issues, and the candidates—what the “public mood” is. In the old days, both candidates and journalists relied on various “experts” for these assessments. They included party leaders, elected officials, and such unobtrusive indicators as the size of crowds that turn out for scheduled events. But the size of a crowd, for example, is an imperfect measure of public opinion because it is often difficult to associate a good measure of valence or affect with sheer numbers of participants, as well as to gauge the intensity of feelings associated with the views that its members hold. For a very long time, what was missing in American politics was a way to produce systematic and reliable measures of public opinion, information that could be used to plan or revise strategy or to contextualize reporting of what the candidates were saying and doing.

While politicians and journalists have always been interested in knowing about public opinion, the extensive application of survey research techniques did not begin until the 1930s, when the “founding fathers,” such as George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley, began to collect and publish opinion data. From the start, their efforts were possible because of relationships they established with newspapers and magazines. They needed the mass media to serve as outlets for the wide dissemination of their results because their public opinion business was a way of promoting their firms’ proprietary work for commercial clients. And these news outlets were always looking for new and timely content.

After World War II, improvements in sampling methods and increasing commercial demand for survey research led to an in-

crease in polling. The candidates themselves turned to public opinion polls as an integral part of their own research efforts, using the information to supplement analyses of historical voting patterns. At the same time, the public dissemination of data rapidly accelerated after the important news organizations in the United States—the networks and major metropolitan daily newspapers—began to collaborate on their own independent data collection. Now the news coverage of presidential campaigns is filled with poll results, both from polls leading up to a primary or general election day and then from exit polls of voters leaving their balloting places. The former data are used to explain and dissect the campaign, and the latter are used to provide poll-based explanations of the “meaning” of the outcome, as well as to project the winners.

News organizations and journalists justified their entry into the polling business because they believed that the use of poll data contributed to their objectivity in producing news about politics. When they purchased results from the Gallup poll, or one of its competitors, they acquired useful content at a reasonable price. Technological shifts that reduced the cost of polling—most notably the penetration of telephones into virtually every American household and the availability of microcomputers that serve as low-cost interviewing devices and data analysis machines—raised the prospect of independent data-collection activities. And news organizations further justified this on the basis of increased editorial control: they could ask *whatever questions* they wanted and put studies into the field *whenever* they wanted if they ran their own polling operations.

These are the technological and business trends that accelerated the production of polling data and their increased use in news making. They explain why we have more polls, but they do not tell us what difference polls make or what impact they have on American political life. These are more subjective issues, but we do have a view on this.

There is a substantial body of literature, growing in size and increasingly compelling in terms of the evidence mustered, that indicates that polls have a substantial impact on the American politi-

cal process. Poll results have an impact on the vitality and viability of candidacies, affecting who can raise money, organize a field staff, and secure volunteers. News coverage containing poll results has an impact on assessments that citizens make of candidates and how they decide to vote. And polls clearly have an effect on how campaigns are covered, as reporters, editors, and producers use this information to make decisions about who to cover and how to frame the coverage.

We are not opposed to polls and polling; on the contrary, we see election polls in terms of their largely unfulfilled potential. There is plenty of room for them to make a substantial contribution to levels of citizen knowledge and understanding of the political process, including the provision of information about how fellow citizens see the political world in terms of issues and how they respond to candidates and their campaigns.

Unfortunately, these possibilities go largely unrealized because too much campaign reporting is devoted to who is ahead and who is behind—a form of “horserace” coverage to which polls easily lend themselves. Polls are also used to support explanations of campaign strategy and dynamics, rather than focus on the issues that concern voters and their appreciation and understanding of what the candidates have to say about them.

Our hope is that if citizens understand more about how polls are conducted, analyzed, and reported in the media, they will be able to think about other ways in which such information would be useful to them. And on an informed basis, they will be able and want to exert pressure on news organizations to alter some elements of their coverage so they will be more responsive to the informational interests and needs of their readers and viewers.

The Organization of This Book

We faced two fundamental issues in organizing this book: What information should we present? And how should we present it? On the first score, we used our own backgrounds in survey research, mass communication, and political science to select appropriate

topics and organize them in a useful way. On the second score, we adopted a question-and-answer format for presenting the information because our dealings with students and other members of the public suggested that there was a thirst for more information about polls—where they come from, how they are used, and with what effect—that was most commonly expressed to us in question form.

On the matter of content, we have organized the book in ten chapters that highlight the major elements surrounding polls and polling in the United States: their history and adoption by news organizations; the basics of data-collection techniques; typical analysis strategies; and, finally, keys to understanding and interpreting poll results based on a critical review of the sources of the data. These are the main areas of interest and concern that people have expressed when we talk with them.

The book begins with an introduction to polls and surveys that provides a broad overview of what they are and where they come from. This set of principles is extended to political polls, and the differences in polls conducted for candidates and media organizations. This first section ends with a general description of how news organizations collect and report election poll data.

In the next section, the four main elements of the design and analysis of polls are discussed. These include sampling procedures, interviewing procedures, and the design of questionnaires. These chapters cover such topics as scientific and unscientific procedures for selecting respondents, and what difference they make. This is followed by a discussion of how interviews take place and the differences between talking to people face-to-face, on the telephone, or using a self-administered questionnaire. Then the content turns to how individual questions are written and how they are combined to form questionnaires. Finally, different elements of analysis are described in a nontechnical way that highlights principles and does not involve any detailed statistical concepts or procedures.

The book concludes with chapters on evaluating polls and a discussion of common problems and complaints about polls—some of which have merit and others of which do not. Based on the con-

cepts of “good” and “bad” practice covered in the preceding chapters, we offer the reader a guide to evaluating polls and poll-based content they might encounter. And we provide a framework for thinking about election polls and the contributions they might make to politics and an informed citizenry.

Within each chapter, the information is presented in a question-and-answer format intended to simplify the presentation and interpretation of important points. In a certain sense, the formulation of these questions was the easiest part of our task. These are the questions that people always ask us, directly or indirectly, depending on their level of prior knowledge and their ability to formulate their interests and concerns in a particular way.

In some cases, we developed a list of key questions and then found we had to develop a list of prior questions whose answers would inform the meaning of and response to the question we started with. Sometimes, the formulation of the answer to a question led to another question and the need to answer it. Finally, we developed answers to each question, first dividing up the questions between us and eventually reviewing each other’s responses to the questions. Each answer was prepared with a goal of keeping the length relatively short and the language as simple and direct as possible when dealing with a relatively technical subject. As a further aid to the reader, we have incorporated a glossary to the book containing brief definitions of key concepts. Each chapter has an annotated bibliography to steer the reader to additional discussions of the main topics addressed in that section. And there are appendixes that contain the key provisions of the public disclosure statements of the two main organizations devoted to public opinion research in the United States: the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) and the National Council of Public Polls (NCPP).

Concluding Comments

Any project of this scope requires assistance from a number of people. We discussed the concept with several of our colleagues,

and we received useful feedback from Eleanor Singer and Warren Mitofsky, a visitor in Ann Arbor in fall 1995. Santa Traugott was a careful reader and editor of early versions. Any errors or problems that remain are of course our own responsibility.

We started this project on a schedule that seemed reasonable to us, especially since we thought we could write quickly. In the end, the complications of producing this first edition and marketing it during a presidential election year were greater than we expected. All through our discussions with potential publishers, Ed Artinian at Chatham House was supportive and encouraging. In the end, he promised miracles in the production phase, and he has fulfilled all his promises.

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I

WHAT ARE POLLS AND SURVEYS? AND WHY ARE THEY CONDUCTED?

A poll or a survey is a method of collecting information from people by asking them questions. Most polls involve a standardized questionnaire, and they usually collect the information from a sample of people rather than the entire population.

People with different interests conduct polls and surveys for many different reasons.

Candidates use polls as an essential part of the intelligence-gathering operation of their campaign. Polls provide a candidate with information about what the voters are thinking and how they are inclined to vote. Many candidates also use poll results to stimulate contributions to their campaigns or to dissuade people from contributing to another candidate.

Media organizations conduct polls to collect information for use in news stories and to form news judgments about what kinds of coverage to provide. A substantial portion of the news derived from polls involves who is ahead and who is behind, and by how much. At the end of the campaign, media organizations use polls to project the winner of the race.

Political scientists and other researchers interested in the dynamics of campaigns and elections use polls to learn about how the candidates behave and how voters respond to campaign stimuli. They try to explain why voters react to candidates in certain ways, but they are usually not interested in projecting the winner of a race.

What is a survey?

A *survey* is a data-collection technique that involves a questionnaire administered to a group of individuals. The *questionnaire* consists of multiple items, or questions, ranging from just a few that take only minutes to complete to several hundred that could take more than an hour to complete. The questionnaire can be administered by an interviewer in a face-to-face setting, on the telephone, in the mail, or by handing it to a respondent to fill out (a self-administered questionnaire).

Questionnaires can include items on a wide variety of topics. The questions can measure behavior ("Did you vote for president in 1992?"), opinions or attitudes ("Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?"), or the personal characteristics of the respondents ("How old are you?").

The group of individuals interviewed almost always consists of a *sample* selected from a larger population. In order to use the sample to make inferences back to the population, the respondents in the sample must be selected in a scientific way using probability methods.

How does a poll differ from a survey?

In principle, a poll and a survey are the same thing. The term *poll* is usually applied to surveys done by commercial organizations, including media organizations. A poll typically involves a questionnaire containing relatively few questions, and it is conducted across a brief interviewing period (often just a few days). The sample size of a poll usually ranges from 600 to 1,500 respondents.

Surveys are more typically conducted by academic researchers and government researchers. They usually involve much longer questionnaires, and they sometimes involve much larger sample sizes, numbering in the tens of thousands of respondents. The interviewing periods are often much longer, ranging from several weeks to a few months.

How many different kinds of surveys are there?

Depending on the classification criteria, there are several kinds of

surveys. One way to classify surveys is by the interviewing technique. Most election polls are conducted on the telephone, but some studies (including exit polls) are conducted using *self-administered questionnaires*. *Face-to-face interviews*, which are the most expensive to conduct, are usually limited to academic and government research projects.

Another way to classify surveys is according to their design, especially in the way that they can be used to measure change. It is common to talk about *cross-sectional surveys*, *longitudinal studies*, and *panel studies*.

In a *cross-sectional survey*, a single sample of respondents is interviewed once and asked a set of questions. All by themselves, cross-sectional surveys do not measure change. Most polls reported in the media involve this kind of design.

In a *longitudinal design*, the same questions or entire questionnaire is administered over time to a series of independent samples consisting of new respondents each time. The estimates produced by each survey are compared in order to measure gross levels of change in a population.

In a *panel design*, the same respondents are interviewed at more than one point in time, and they are usually asked at least some of the same questions each time. Through a panel design, a researcher can measure change at the individual level by comparing each respondent's answers to the same question at each point in time. This produces a different measure of change than a longitudinal design does.

Are there other ways to obtain people's opinions?

People express their opinions in a variety of ways: through demonstrations and picketing, the kinds and amounts of products they buy, their membership in organizations, or the size of the checks they write to political candidates and special-interest groups. Sales, demonstrations, and memberships are only imperfect indicators of underlying opinions; they do not tell researchers about things like how intensely people hold their opinions or the reasons why they