# COVERING POLLS:

## A HANDBOOK FOR JOURNALISTS

MEDIA STUDIES CENTER
FUNDED BY THE FREEDOM FORUM

# Introduction

**Larry McGill**

Polls are an inseparable part of news coverage, and they will remain so, for one very simple reason. For all their potential flaws, there is no more accurate way to gauge the sentiments of the public than through carefully designed and executed opinion polls. This makes polls one of the best available sources of new and newsworthy information.

Because well-done polls are reliable sources of information about the public, journalists have little choice but to pay attention to them. But because not all polls are well done, journalists must also understand how to recognize which polls are valid and which are meaningless.

In this handbook, we have compiled what we believe to be the essential tools reporters need for evaluating public opinion polls. Of course, there are excellent longer publications available for those who specialize in poll reporting, but anyone who reports poll results needs to be familiar, at a minimum, with the resources in this guide.

This guide is designed to help journalists:

- Determine whether a poll has been conducted according to accepted professional standards (**"20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask about Poll Results"**)
- Determine whether a poll's findings have legitimate news value (**"When is a Poll Newsworthy?"**)
- Avoid polls that are likely to produce irrelevant or potentially misleading information (**"To Editors: The Do's and Don'ts of Reporting on Polls"**)
- Understand the limitations of even well-done polls (**"Public Opinion Research: An Honorable Profession, Warts and All"**)

A final essay by CBS News' director of surveys Kathleen A. Frankovic (**"Defending the Polls: Three Challenges for 2000 and Beyond"**) examines the increasingly contentious environment in which political pollsters operate, a factor which complicates not only the pollster's job but the job of the political reporter as well.

The bottom line for journalists is this: no poll is perfect. But professionally conducted polls that take care to minimize potential sources of error and bias often yield important social insights that are unavailable through any other reporting technique.

Valid poll findings are a valuable public commodity. It is up to journalists to ensure that such information is conveyed to the public accurately and fairly.

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# 20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask about Poll Results

**Sheldon R. Gawiser, Ph.D.**

For journalists and for pollsters, questions are the most frequently used tools for gathering information. For the journalist looking at a set of poll numbers, here are the 20 questions to ask the pollster before reporting any results. This publication is designed to help working journalists do a thorough, professional job covering polls. It is not a primer on how to conduct a public opinion survey.

The only polls that should be reported are "scientific" polls. A number of the questions here will help you decide whether or not a poll is a "scientific" one worthy of coverage — or an unscientific survey without value.

Unscientific pseudo-polls are widespread and sometimes entertaining, if always quite meaningless. Examples include 900-number call-in polls, man-on-the-street surveys, most Internet polls, shopping mall polls, and even the classic toilet tissue poll featuring pictures of the candidates on each sheet.

The major distinguishing difference between scientific and unscientific polls is who picks the respondents for the survey. In a scientific poll, the pollster identifies and seeks out the people to be interviewed. In an unscientific poll, the respondents usually "volunteer" their opinions, selecting themselves for the poll.

**G. Evans Witt**

The results of the well-conducted scientific poll can provide a reliable guide to the opinions of many people in addition to those interviewed — even the opinions of all Americans. The results of an unscientific poll tell you nothing beyond simply what those respondents say.

With these 20 questions in hand, the journalist can seek the facts to decide how to handle every poll that comes across the news desk each day.

**1. Who did the poll?** What polling firm, research house, political campaign, corporation or other group conducted the poll? This is always the first question to ask.

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If you don't know who did the poll, you can't get the answers to all the other questions listed here. If the person providing poll results can't or won't tell you who did it, serious questions must be raised about the reliability and truthfulness of the results being presented.

Reputable polling firms will provide you with the information you need to evaluate the survey. Because reputation is important to a quality firm, a professionally conducted poll will avoid many errors.

**2. Who paid for the poll and why was it done?** You must know who paid for the survey, because that tells you — and your audience — who thought these topics are important enough to spend money finding out what people think. This is central to the whole issue of why the poll was done.

Polls are not conducted for the good of the world. They are conducted for a reason — either to gain helpful information or to advance a particular cause.

It may be the news organization wants to develop a good story. It may be the politician wants to be re-elected. It may be that the corporation is trying to push sales of its new product. Or a special interest group may be trying to prove that its views are the views of the entire country. All are legitimate reasons for doing a poll.

The important issue for you as a journalist is whether the motive for doing the poll creates such serious doubts about the validity of the results that the numbers should not be publicized.

Examples of suspect polls are private polls conducted for a political campaign. These polls are conducted solely to help the candidate win — and for no other reason. The poll may have very slanted questions or a strange sampling methodology, all with a tactical campaign purpose. A campaign may be testing out new slogans, a new statement on a key issue or a new attack on an opponent. But since the goal of the candidate's poll may not be a straightforward, unbiased reading of the public's sentiments, the results should be reported with great care.

Likewise, reporting on a survey by a special interest group is tricky. For example, an environmental group trumpets a poll saying the American people support strong measures to protect the environment. That may be true, but the poll was conducted for a group with definite views. That may have swayed the question wording, the timing of the poll, the group interviewed and the order of the questions. You should examine the poll to be certain that it accurately reflects public opinion and does not simply push a single viewpoint.

**3. How many people were interviewed for the survey?** Because polls give approximate answers, the more people interviewed in a scientific poll, the smaller the error due to the size of the sample, all other things being equal.

A common trap to avoid is that "more is automatically better." It is absolutely true that the more people interviewed in a scientific survey, the smaller the sampling error — all other things being equal. But other factors may be more important in judging the quality of a survey.

**4. How were those people chosen?** The key reason that some polls reflect public opinion accurately and other polls are unscientific junk is how the people were chosen to be interviewed.

In scientific polls, the pollster uses a specific method for picking respondents. In unscientific polls, the person picks himself to participate.

The method pollsters use to pick interviewees relies on the bedrock of mathematical reality: when the chance of selecting each person in the target population is known, then and only then do the results of the sample survey reflect the entire population. This is called a random sample or a probability sample. This is the reason that interviews with 1,000 American adults can accurately reflect the opinions of more than 200 million American adults.

Most scientific samples use special techniques to be economically feasible. For example, some sampling methods for telephone interviewing do not just pick randomly generated telephone numbers. Only telephone exchanges that are known to contain working residential numbers are selected — to reduce the number of wasted calls. This still produces a random sample. Samples of only listed telephone numbers do not produce a random sample of all working telephone numbers.

But even a random sample cannot be purely random in practice since some people don't have phones, refuse to answer, or aren't home.

**5. What area (nation, state, or region) or what group (teachers, lawyers, democratic voters, etc.) were these people chosen from?** It is absolutely critical to know from which group the interviewees were chosen.

You must know if a sample was drawn from among all adults in the United States, or just from those in one state or in one city, or from another group. For example, a survey of business people can reflect the opinions of business people — but not of all adults. Only if the interviewees were chosen from among all American adults can the poll reflect the opinions of all American adults.

In the case of telephone samples, the population represented is that of people living in households with telephones. For most purposes, telephone households may be similar to the general population. But if you were reporting a poll on what it was like to be poor or homeless, a telephone sample would not be appropriate. Remember, the use of a scientific sampling technique does not mean that the correct population was interviewed.

Political polls are especially sensitive to this issue.

In pre-primary and pre-election polls, which people are chosen as the base for poll results is critical. A poll of all adults, for example, is not very useful on a primary race where only 25 percent of the registered voters actually turn out. So look for polls based on registered voters, "likely voters," previous primary voters, and such. These distinctions are important and should be included in the story, for one of the most difficult challenges in polling is trying to figure out who actually is going to vote.

**6. Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed?** One of the easiest ways to misrepresent the results of a poll is to report the answers of only a subgroup. For example, there is usually a substantial difference between the opinions of Democrats and Republicans on campaign-related matters. Reporting the opinions of only Democrats in a poll purported to be of all adults would substantially misrepresent the results.

Poll results based on Democrats must be identified as such and should be reported as representing only Democratic opinions.

Of course, reporting on just one subgroup can be exactly the right course. In polling on a primary contest, it is the opinions of those who can vote in the primary that count — not those who cannot vote in that contest. Each state has its own rules about who can participate in its primaries. Primary polls should include only eligible primary voters.

**7. Who should have been interviewed and was not?** No survey ever reaches everyone who should have been interviewed. You ought to know what steps were undertaken to minimize non-response, such as the number of attempts to reach the appropriate respondent and over how many days.

There are many reasons why people who should have been interviewed were not. They may have refused attempts to interview them. Or interviews may not have been attempted if people were not home when the interviewer called. Or there may have been a language problem or a hearing problem.

**8. When was the poll done?** Events have a dramatic impact on poll results. Your interpretation of a poll should depend on when it was conducted relative to key events. Even the freshest poll results can be overtaken by events. The president may have given a stirring speech to the nation, the stock market may have crashed or an oil tanker may have sunk, spilling millions of gallons of crude on beautiful beaches.

Poll results that are several weeks or months old may be perfectly valid, but events may have erased any newsworthy relationship to current public opinion.

**9. How were the interviews conducted?** There are three main possibilities: in person, by telephone or by mail.

Most surveys are now conducted by telephone, with the calls made by interviewers from a central location. However, some surveys are still conducted by sending interviewers into people's homes to conduct the interviews.

Some surveys are conducted by mail. In scientific polls, the pollster picks the people to receive the mail questionnaires. The respondent fills out the questionnaire and returns it.

Mail surveys can be excellent sources of information, but it takes weeks to do a mail survey, meaning that the results cannot be as timely as a telephone survey. And mail surveys can be subject to other kinds of errors, particularly low response rates. In many mail surveys, more people fail to participate than do. This makes the results suspect.

Surveys done in shopping malls, in stores or on the sidewalk may have their uses for their sponsors, but publishing the results in the media is not among them. These approaches may yield interesting human interest stories, but they should never be treated as if they represent a public opinion poll.

Advances in computer technology have allowed the development of computerized interviewing systems that dial the phone, play taped questions to a respondent and then record answers the person gives by punching numbers on the telephone keypad. Such surveys have a variety of severe problems, including uncontrolled selection of respondents and poor response rates, and should be avoided.

**10. What about polls on the Internet or World Wide Web?** The explosive growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web has given rise to an equally explosive growth in various types of online polls and surveys. Many online polls may be good entertainment, but they tell you nothing about public opinion.

Most Internet polls are simply the latest variation on the pseudo-polls that have existed for many years. Whether the effort is a click-on Web survey, a dial-in poll or a mail-in survey, the results should be ignored and not reported. All these pseudo-polls suffer from the same problem: the respondents are self-selected. The individuals choose themselves to take part in the poll — there is no pollster choosing the respondents to be interviewed.

Remember, the purpose of a poll is to draw conclusions about the population, not about the sample. In these pseudo-polls, there is no way to project the results to any larger group. Any similarity between the results of a pseudo-poll and a scientific survey is pure chance.

Clicking on your candidate's button in the "voting booth" on a Web site may drive up the numbers for your candidate in a presidential horse-race poll online. For most such efforts, no effort is made to pick the respondents, to limit users from voting multiple times or to reach out for people who might not normally visit the Web site.

The 900-number dial-in polls may be fine for deciding whether or not Larry the Lobster should be cooked on "Saturday Night Live" or even for dedicated fans to express their opinions on who is the greatest quarterback in the National Football League. The opinions expressed may be real, but in sum the numbers are just entertainment. There is no way to tell who actually called in, how old they are, or how many times each person called.

Never be fooled by the number of responses. In some cases a few people call in thousands of times. Even if 500,000 calls are tallied, no one has any real knowledge of what the results mean. If big numbers impress you, remember that the *Literary Digest's* non-scientific sample of 12,000,000 people said Landon would beat Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election.

Mail-in coupon polls are just as bad. In this case, the magazine or newspaper includes a coupon to be returned with the answers to the questions. Again, there is no way to know who responded and how many times each person did.

Another variation on the pseudo-poll comes as part of a fund-raising effort. An organization sends out a letter with a survey form attached to a large list of people, asking for opinions and for the respondent to send money to support the organization or pay for tabulating the survey. The questions are often loaded and the results of such an effort are always meaningless.

**If the poll in question is part of a fund-raising pitch, pitch it — in the wastebasket.**

This technique is used by a wide variety of organizations from political parties and special interest groups to charitable organizations. Again, if the poll in question is part of a fund-raising pitch, pitch it — in the wastebasket.

With regard to the Internet, methods are being developed to sample the opinions of those who have online access, although these efforts are just starting. Even a survey that accurately

sampled those who have access to the Internet would still fall short of a poll of all Americans, since only a relatively small fraction of the nation's adults have access to the Internet.

**11. What is the sampling error for the poll results?** Interviews with a scientific sample of 1,000 adults can accurately reflect the opinions of nearly 200 million American adults. That means interviews attempted with all 200 million adults — if such were possible — would give approximately the same results as a well-conducted survey based on 1,000 interviews.

What happens if another carefully done poll of 1,000 adults gives slightly different results from the first survey? Neither of the polls is "wrong." This range of possible results is called the error due to sampling, often called the margin of error.

This is not an "error" in the sense of making a mistake. Rather, it is a measure of the possible range of approximation in the results because a sample was used.

Pollsters express the degree of the certainty of results based on a sample as a "confidence level." This means a sample is likely to be within so many points of the results one would have gotten if an interview were attempted with the entire target population. They usually say this with 95 percent confidence.

Thus, for example, a "3 percentage point margin of error" in a national poll means that if the attempt were made to interview every adult in the nation with the same questions in the same way at about the same time as the poll was taken, the poll's answers would fall within plus or minus 3 percentage points of the complete count's results 95 percent of the time.

This does not address the issue of whether people cooperate with the survey, or if the questions are understood, or if any other methodological issue exists. The sampling error is only the portion of the potential error in a survey introduced by using a sample rather than interviewing the entire population. Sampling error tells us nothing about the refusals or those consistently unavailable for interview; it also tells us nothing about the biasing effects of a particular question wording or the bias a particular interviewer may inject into the interview situation.

Remember that the sampling error margin applies to each figure in the results — it is at least 3 percentage points plus or minus for each one in our example. Thus, in a poll question matching two candidates for president, both figures are subject to sampling error.

**12. Who's on first?** Sampling error raises one of the thorniest problems in the presentation of poll results: For a horse-race poll, when is one candidate really ahead of the other?

Certainly, if the gap between the two candidates is less than the error margin, you should not say that one candidate is ahead of the other. You can say the race is "close," the race is "roughly even," or there is "little difference between the candidates." But it should not be called a "dead heat" unless the candidates are tied with the same percentages.

And just as certainly, when the gap between the two candidates is equal to or more than twice the error margin — 6 percentage points in our example — and if there are only two candidates and no undecided voters, you can say with confidence that the poll says Candidate A is clearly leading Candidate B.

When the gap between the two candidates is more than the error margin but less than twice the error margin, you should say that Candidate A "is ahead," "has an advantage" or "holds an edge." The story should mention that there is a small possibility that Candidate B is ahead of Candidate A.

When there are more than two choices or undecided voters — in the real world — the question gets much more complicated. While the solution is statistically complex, you can fairly easily evaluate this situation by estimating the error margin. You can do that by taking the percent for each of the two candidates in question and multiplying it by the total respondents for the survey (only the likely voters if that is appropriate). This number is now the effective sample size for your judgement. Look up the sampling error in a table of statistics for that reduced sample size, and apply it to the candidate percentages. If they overlap, then you do not know if one is ahead. If they do not, then you can make the judgement that one candidate has a lead.

And bear in mind that when subgroup results are reported — women or blacks, or young people — the sampling error margin for those figures is greater than for results based on the sample as a whole.

**13. What other kinds of factors can skew poll results?** The margin of sampling error is just one possible source of inaccuracy in a poll. It is not necessarily the greatest source of possible error; we use it because it's the only one that can be quantified. And, other things being equal, it is useful for evaluating whether differences between poll results are meaningful in a statistical sense.

Question phrasing and question order are also likely sources of flaws. Inadequate interviewer training and supervision, data processing errors and other operational problems can also introduce errors. Professional polling operations are less subject to these problems than volunteer-conducted polls, which are usually less trustworthy.

You should always ask if the poll results have been "weighted." This process is usually used to account for unequal probabilities of selection and to adjust slightly the demographics in the sample. You should be aware that a poll could be manipulated unduly by weighting the numbers to produce a desired result. While some weighting may be appropriate, other weighting is not. Weighting a scientific poll is only appropriate to reflect unequal probabilities or to adjust to independent values that are mostly constant.

**14. What questions were asked?** You must find out the exact wording of the poll questions. Why? Because the very wording of questions can make major differences in the results.

Perhaps the best test of any poll question is your reaction to it. On the face of it, does the question seem fair and unbiased? Does it present a balanced set of choices? Would most people be able to answer the question?

On sensitive questions — such as abortion — the complete wording of the question should probably be included in your story. It may well be worthwhile to compare the results of several different polls from different organizations on sensitive questions. You should examine carefully both the results and the exact wording of the questions.

**15. In what order were the questions asked?** Sometimes the very order of the questions can have an impact on the results. Often that impact is intentional; sometimes it is not. The impact of order can often be subtle.

During troubled economic times, for example, if people are asked what they think of the economy before they are asked their opinion of the president, the presidential popularity rating will probably be lower than if you had reversed the order of the questions. And in good economic times, the opposite is true.

What is important here is whether the questions that were asked prior to the critical question in the poll could sway the results. If the poll asks questions about abortion just before a question about an abortion ballot measure, the prior questions could sway the results.

**16. What about "push polls?"** In recent years, some political campaigns and special interest groups have used a technique called "push polls" to spread rumors and even outright lies about opponents. These efforts are not polls, but are political manipulation trying to hide behind the smokescreen of a public opinion survey.

In a "push poll," a large number of people are called by telephone and asked to participate in a purported survey. The survey "questions" are really thinly-veiled accusations against an opponent or repetitions of rumors about a candidate's personal or professional behavior. The focus here is on making certain the respondent hears and understands the accusation in the question, not in gathering the respondent's opinions.

"Push polls" are unethical and have been condemned by professional polling organizations.

"Push polls" must be distinguished from some types of legitimate surveys done by political campaigns. At times, a campaign poll may ask a series of questions about contrasting issue positions of the candidates — or various things that could be said about a candidate, some of which are negative. These legitimate questions seek to gauge the public's reaction to a candidate's position or to a possible legitimate attack on a candidate's record.

A legitimate poll can be distinguished from a "push poll" usually by: the number of calls made — a push poll makes thousands and thousands of calls, instead of hundreds for most surveys; the identity of who is making the telephone calls — a polling firm for a scientific survey as opposed to a telemarketing house or the campaign itself for a "push poll"; the lack of any true gathering of results in a "push poll," which has as its only objective the dissemination of false or misleading information.

**Conflicting polls often make good stories.**

**17. What other polls have been done on this topic?**
Do they say the same thing? If they are different, why are they different? Results of other polls — by a newspaper or television station, a public survey firm or even a candidate's opponent — should be used to check and contrast poll results you have in hand.

If the polls differ, first check the timing of the interviewing. If the polls were done at different times, the differing results may demonstrate a swing in public opinion.

If the polls were done about the same time, ask each poll sponsor for an explanation of the differences. Conflicting polls often make good stories.

**18. So I've asked all the questions. The answers sound good. The poll is correct, right?** Usually, yes. However, remember that the laws of chance alone say that the results of one poll out of 20 may be skewed away from the public's real views just because of sampling error.

Also remember that no matter how good the poll, no matter how wide the margin, no matter how big the sample, a pre-election poll does not show that one candidate has the race "locked up." Things change — often and dramatically in politics. That's why candidates campaign.

**19. With all these potential problems, should we ever report poll results?** Yes. Because reputable polling organizations consistently do good work. In spite of the difficulties, the public opinion survey, correctly conducted, is still the best objective measure of the state of the views of the public.

**20. Is this poll worth reporting?** If the poll was conducted correctly, and you have been able to obtain the information outlined here, your news judgment and that of your editors should be applied to polls, as it is to every other element of a story.



*For any additional information on any aspect of polling or a specific poll, please call the NCPP office at 800-239-0909.*

# When Is a Poll Newsworthy?

**Ken Dautrich**

We reviewed a sample of recent poll stories and press releases on poll findings from polling organizations issued since September 1992. Based on our review, we offer this advice to journalists who are covering poll stories in the 2000 presidential race:

**1. Beware of press releases that suggest a "slight" or "modest" trend.** These are often pollsters' code words for "not statistically significant" and might be interpreted as "we can't really say there is a trend, but it makes for a more interesting press release."

Some of what is reported as a "trend" may not be that at all, but rather the result of the sampling error. For example, polls reported that Clinton's approval ratings "declined slightly," from 60 percent in May 1999 to 57 percent in October. Since the May and October polls are based on samples, there is a calculable sampling error associated with each — in this case, plus or minus 3 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

So we do the next best thing. We interview a random sample of all voters. Random samples are pretty good representations of the entire population of voters about 95 percent of the time. But 5 percent of the time they may not reflect the population very well at all. That's why we have to talk in terms of probabilities and margins of error.

What we mean when we say there's a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percent at the 95 percent confidence level is that there is a 95 percent chance that Clinton's actual approval rating is somewhere (we don't know exactly where) in a six point range between 3 percent above and 3 percent below the approval rating given by the sample respondents.

To return to the example of Clinton's 1999 approval ratings: In May there was a 95 percent chance that Clinton's approval was in the 57 percent to 63 percent range, and in October there was a 95 percent chance it was in the 54 percent to 60 percent range.

In short, there is no statistical evidence that there actually was a decline in Clinton's ratings from May to October 1999.

**2. Distinguish between poll findings and a pollster's interpretation of poll findings.** There may be a huge difference often disguised in a press release.

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Polling is a science. If done well, polls can fairly accurately represent the opinions of all voters. Pollsters and poll commentators often stretch the scientific findings far beyond what's reasonable.

An example from 1992: In September, a national poll by a leading firm was released, stating that "Barbara Bush's popularity reduces Clinton's lead by four percentage points." The data in the poll did show that Mrs. Bush was more popular than Mrs. Clinton. However, there was no evidence to even hint that Mrs. Bush's popularity had any influence on Bill Clinton's lead.

**3. Investigate alternative explanations for poll results that are "surprising."** Surprising findings whet the appetite of many reporters and are more likely to make news. Ironically, poorly done polls are more likely to find "surprising" results.

Blatant violations of good polls include 900-number call-in polls, one-day instant polls, bullet polls (in which respondents are asked questions by a recorded voice and respond by punching in numbers on their phones), and online polls claiming to represent voter opinion. Less obvious violations are low response rates (pollsters' dirtiest little secret) and biased questions wording or ordering. Also, remember that even the best polls report sampling error at the 95 percent confidence level, i.e., that the sampling error associated with five of every 100 polls will be larger than the plus or minus range that is given.

**4. Beware of the analyst who seeks to predict the election based on a poll.** Polls describe what is happening at the time they are taken. Period. They offer the illusion of predictability because most voters do not change their minds from late in the campaign to Election Day. More and more, however, voters are deciding later and later in the campaign. Up to 10 percent of all voters will not make up their minds until the day of the election itself. Further, contemporary campaigns are designed to move voters late in the campaign-significant portions of the advertising budget are spent the weekend before the election.

Last minute movement can be real and not predictable by pre-election polls. Jesse Ventura winning the Minnesota governor's race in 1998, Perot doing better than expected in the 1992 race, Reagan crushing Carter in 1980, Truman defeating Dewey in 1948 are only a few examples. Any well-done poll is merely a picture of the here and now.

A poll's ability to predict is limited, particularly in a volatile environment like a presidential campaign.

**5. Polls may be under-estimating the potential for the Reform Party or another strong third-party candidate.** Polls conducted late in the 1992 campaign consistently measured Ross Perot's support to be five points lower than his actual vote (19 percent). The reasons for Perot's success in 1992 still leaves many of the best pollsters scratching their heads.

Perot was a pollster's nightmare. The methods pollsters use to measure voting behavior (e.g., question wording, allocating undecided or leaning voters, estimating who will actually vote, etc.) were developed over decades of American elections where two candidates and two parties dominated. Our methods and techniques are

often ill-equipped to deal with a serious third-party challenge. Although Perot may not be a factor in the 2000 campaign, the Reform Party could be. Pollsters may be no more ready to deal with a third-party candidate now than they were in 1992.

**6. When reporting polls, don't lose sight of the forest for the trees.** Taken together, polls in the last two months of the 1996 campaign showed little movement at all. Sampling error or other methodological factors account for most movement (when considering the findings of six major polling organizations). Yet a review of the press releases of September and October 1996 suggests it was a roller-coaster ride. Changes in the percentage of the vote Bob Dole, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot received across most major polls in the last month of the 1996 campaign were not statistically significant. That is, statistically speaking, little to nothing changed. Most of the hoopla about the horse-race trends was much ado about nothing, when examining the findings from a scientific perspective.

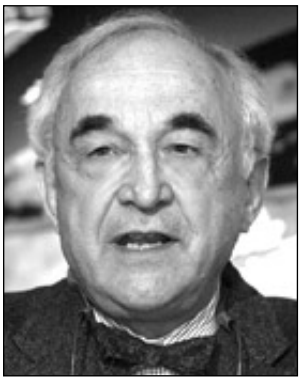
**7. Lighten up on the horse race.** As a close review of the 1992 and 1996 polls reveals, there was little real change in the horse-race standings during the final two months of the campaign. Yet most of the press releases issued by polling organizations during that time focused on the horse race.

Not only were the media and the pollsters fixated on a story that never happened, but they were neglecting to give voters what they wanted to help them decide for whom to vote. A CSRA poll conducted in October 1999 found that voters are much more interested in stories about the candidates issue positions and stories on how the election might affect them than they are in stories about the horse race. Many voters say flat out that the media pay too much attention to the horse race.

With voters deciding who to vote for later than ever in the campaign, they will need solid background information on the candidates up until the very last minute.

Beyond these seven suggestions for evaluating coverage of election polls, the usual cautions for covering any public opinion survey should be considered, such as knowing who the sponsor is, reviewing the actual question items that were asked, reviewing the response rate and sampling error and knowing when interviews were conducted. Pre-election polls, if done well and reported well, can provide the basis for superior news coverage and commentary on the campaign. By becoming better consumers of election poll data, journalists can help voters become better poll users as well.

# To Editors: The Do's and Don'ts of Reporting on Polls



**Philip Meyer**

While the use of polls by journalists has improved immeasurably in the past three decades, the tool of polling is still not being put to its best use. Too often, polls are treated as referenda on policy options, ignoring the fact that the citizens represented in the hypothetical referendum have unequal knowledge, vastly unequal power, and unequal stakes in the outcome.

If I were an editor, I would post the following guidelines on poll reporting in my newsroom:

**1. Don't use polls to decide what issues to emphasize in election coverage.** The current fashion in civic journalism is to let the public set the campaign agenda. That's an abdication of our leadership responsibility. This behavior parallels the case of politicians who follow the obedient representative model to a fault and watch the polls to make up their own minds. Whether it's done by media or by government officials, it sucks the creativity out of the process.

**2. Don't use polls to ask the public for its expert opinion in matters where it is not expert.** The question, "Do you think race relations in this country are getting better or worse?" makes sense if the object is to compare public perception with reality. But to take public perception as reality, which journalistic interpretation of such polls sometimes does, is nonsense.

**3. Don't imply a monolithic public with uniform knowledge and concern when presenting poll data.** Sort informed from uninformed opinions, weak concerns from strong ones, real attitudes from fake attitudes contrived to please the interviewer.

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4. **Don't report polls without context.** A polling number is generally not useful unless it is compared with another number — whether from another place, another time, or another subset of the population. The Watergate polls were useful, not as a referendum on impeachment, but because they showed a clear declining trend in public support for the president. The Clinton polls were valuable because of their show of consistent support for the president during his difficult time.

And here are some things that should be done that are not now being done:

**1. Do use polls to help subgroups in the electorate understand one another.** A citizen goes to a town meeting not just to express his or her opinion but to find out what other citizens are thinking. Democracy is about compromise, and we can and should adjust our thinking to make a better fit with the community. Polls aimed at helping groups in conflict understand one another would be an excellent application toward the goals of civic journalism. I don't see it being done, although *Newsweek* and Knight Ridder applied polling in that fashion to cover the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

**2. Do use polls to track the process of democratic deliberation.** Years ago, noted pollster Daniel Yankelovich proposed equipping poll questions with a "mushiness index" based on follow-up queries to determine how firmly the attitudes recorded are held. Somebody ought to take him up on that. Those of us who were skeptical about the public's ability to compartmentalize its thinking about Clinton the person and Clinton the leader might have learned from it.

**3. Do use polls to enhance your leadership, not substitute for it.** This applies to news media and politicians. Feedback from polling can show both kinds of leaders how successful they are at getting important messages across. Edmund Burke's model of the representative who owes you his judgment, not just his obedience to your opinion, is one that needs to be used by politicians and by media alike, and I think we undermine that when we take polls to find what to put in and what to keep out of the paper and when we treat a poll as though it's the final answer to a policy question. A poll should never be treated as the answer to a policy question. It is just data to be considered in the context of many kinds of sources.

# Public Opinion Research — An Honorable Profession, Warts and All

**Harry W. O'Neill**

Those of us in survey research are in a fascinating and rewarding profession — an honorable profession of which we all should be proud. I would not have spent 40 years in it and probably would have retired by now had I not found it stimulating, challenging, of significant value, and often just plain fun. We are in possession of a unique process for gathering information that can and does serve many useful purposes for a wide and growing array of users, for consumers, and for the public at large. It is, however, a process that is easily misunderstood, misused, abused, and overused. It is to some of these "warts" that this paper is directed.

Now some may take issue with focusing on problems rather that plaudits, with stressing negatives rather that the positives of our endeavors. However, I think it useful occasionally to take a look at our "warts," if for no other reason than to raise our consciousness and therefore cause us to strive to improve our performance. I do not mean to be a nattering nabob of negativism, but rather to be a constructive conveyor of criticism. So here goes — 10 warts.

**1. Opinion polls have given respectability to uninformed opinion**. We ask people about every conceivable issue and dutifully record their responses — whether or not they have ever heard about the issue or given it any thought prior to our interviewer bringing it to their attention. How much better to ask awareness first and ask opinion only of those with some awareness. But this, of course, takes time and money, both of which often are in short supply. Also, we have been known to probe a complex issue, such as the situation in the Middle East, with two questions, often overly simplified, on an omnibus survey and report the results as definitive public opinion — thereby making another serious contribution to the understanding of our country's foreign policy.

**Harry W. O'Neill** *is vice chairman, Roper Division, Roper Starch Worldwide Inc. He delivered this speech on the occasion of receiving the 1997 award for outstanding achievement from the New York Chapter of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, June 18, 1997.*

**2. We have learned too well to be advocates rather than objective researchers.** Now I have nothing against conducting research to be used for purposes of advocacy. I've done a lot of it and it can serve a legitimate and useful purpose. However, such research presents us with special responsibilities and obligations, which are not always in evidence.

It is tempting to serve our clients or their particular causes too well. For instance, if the National Endowment for the Arts retains us to show that the majority love the arts and are in favor of public funding of the arts, we might ask people if they agree or disagree with this statement: "An active arts program gives people an uplift from their everyday lives, contributes to a community's quality of life, and gives creative people a socially acceptable outlet for their talents." However, if a politician who wants to demonstrate disapproval of public funding of the arts is our client, we might ask people if they agree or disagree with this statement: "Given a severe deficit and a lack of money for education in depressed areas, healthcare for the sick and infirm elderly, and school lunches for hungry children, public funds should be given to so-called artists who exhibit pornographic pictures and dance naked smeared with chocolate syrup." While our advocacy is usually more subtle that this, not infrequently it is just as biased.

Consider this actual example from a number of years ago. It was a poll on the "New Right." The poll claimed that conservatives were moving to the left toward more liberal positions; that the differences between liberals and conservatives are mostly differences of degree rather than direction. Among the several questions asked in this poll were these three:

1. Do you agree or disagree that the federal government ought to help people get medical care at low cost?
2. Do you agree or disagree that the federal government ought to see to it that everybody that wants a job can get one?
3. Do you agree or disagree that if blacks are not getting fair treatment in jobs and housing, the federal government should see to it that they do?

Guess what? Majorities of both liberals and conservatives agreed with each question — leading to the conclusion that "there are many supposedly 'new right' issues on which conservatives and liberals think alike. The way they think on many issues is more reminiscent of the New Deal liberal than of the 'new right' conservative."

At the request of the North American Newspaper Alliance, an equivalent sample was asked the same three questions, except "private enterprise" was substituted for "the federal government." And lo and behold majorities of both conservatives and liberals agreed with each question, proving, of course, that liberals are moving right towards more conservative positions.

The only valid conclusion to be drawn from either poll is that if the public perceives something as a problem and the public is offered a solution, the public probably will support the solution offered. No ideology is involved, only the desire to see pressing and persistent problems solved somehow by somebody. But this was not the publicly released message of the original poll, which was, I suspect, the message the originator of the poll wanted registered.

**3. We mislead the public**. This issue, of course, is related in many ways to the previous one, but more specifically goes to how surveys are released. Given the potential for advocacy research to influence public opinion and given its potential for misuse, not only must it be conducted with particular care, but we must insure that its public release is open and direct, clearly understandable, free of exaggerations, distortions, and unsupported conclusions.

Results must not be over-interpreted; results must be discussed within the specific context and time frame in which the questions were asked; extrapolation, if any, must be clearly indicated as such. Anything less falls short of our professional and ethical obligations to the public.

Recently MCI ran full-page ads touting a poll showing that "Americans voiced their disapproval about local phone monopoly access charges." The results of selected questions were shown. What was not shown is that over six persons in 10 said they had not heard, read, or seen anything about access charges and that seven in 10 were not aware of access charges. But nonetheless the public is told, in large headlines, that they disapprove of that which they don't know and what's more, that nobody is listening to their disapproval.

A current issue is the TV rating system. The Valenti system, which is in place, is age-based. A suggested alternative system is content-based. A group supporting the Valenti age-based system released a survey that showed 83 percent of parents endorsed this system. The problem is that the survey asked only about this system; it offered no alternative. Two other studies — by the Media Studies Center and the National PTA — found the content-based system preferred over the age-based system by about eight in 10. Does this kind of situation not mislead the public?

Our responsibility here is twofold: (1) the proper design of the questionnaire — not, for example, to commit the sin of omission in leaving out a legitimate alternative and (2) controlling our client's releases to insure their accuracy or, when this fails, issuing a corrective release.

Do we mislead when we report with sampling error, creating in the public's mind an image of being more scientific than is warranted? We have made sampling error a household term. No report of a survey in print or on TV, national or local, fails to give the sampling error (often inaccurately stated as a percent rather than in terms of percentage points) and, time or space permitting, the public is told that this is at the 95 percent confidence level. Wow! What precision! Not enough to put a man on the moon, but enough to give the aura of an exact science and, I suspect, leading the public to a false impression of a survey's soundness.

God forbid the public should ever find out that all sampling error and its 95 percent confidence interval really say is that if you conduct the same biased survey among the same unrepresentative sample 100 times you will get the same meaningless results 95 times within plus or minus some percentage points of the result of the particular survey being reported.

Now I will concede that informing the public that our surveys are susceptible to error has its value, but I'm afraid that our emphasis on sampling error — all too often in the absence of the mention of other sources of possible error — can be misleading.

**4. We impose upon the public.** We do this in several ways— apart from calling at dinner or during some more intimate moment — for example, by the sheer amount of research being conducted, by incomprehensible questions, and by unconscionably long interviews.

**It's fair to ask if so much polling — besides trivializing all polling in the public's mind — is an undue burden.**

Survey research may well have become excessive. Pick up any newspaper or magazine or listen to any news program and there is likely to be the report of a poll — ranging from rather important issues such as government spending to trivial issues such as whether lawn ornaments enhance a home's appearance. Just looking at political polls, it has been estimated that more than 400 national and state political polls were conducted for news organizations in the 1996 U.S. presidential campaign, and that, of course, is in addition to local polls and the private polls at all levels. It's fair to ask if so much polling, besides trivializing all polling in the public's mind, is an undue burden.

We also impose by asking stupid, incomprehensible questions. Here is one of my favorite examples. It has been reported that in the sixth month of Clinton's presidency his popularity was weak and his outside consultants, including pollster Stanley Greenberg, were afraid that some of the economic policies being advanced would do further damage. The consultants were against both the House-passed BTU tax and the Senate-passed gas tax. In a poll, Greenberg asked about three options, including asking for respondent support or opposition to the option of dropping both energy taxes. This question was presented to the respondents:

"President Clinton may announce important changes in his economic plan in order to address the slow economy, which he believes is not creating jobs fast enough. This is the proposal: First, eliminate any new taxes on the middle class in order to boost consumer confidence. That means completely eliminating the energy tax. All new taxes will be paid by people making over $140,000. People earning under $30,000 will get tax relief. Second, Clinton will reduce slightly the deficit reduction goal from $500 billion to $480 billion over five years in order to find new incentives to create jobs. The plan will allow tax incentives to small business and technology companies to create jobs once the House and Senate pass his revised economic plan within a month."

Of the respondents, 63 percent expressed support, 28 percent opposition. Do you really believe this? How many people do you think understood this 126-word question? And what do you think the effect of such drivel is on our image?

Then there is the imposition of the excessively long interview. We laboriously construct a 45-minute telephone questionnaire on oven cleaners wherein excited consumers are asked to rate five competitive products on 30 attributes using a 10-point scale, rotating everything possible to avoid position bias, and testing five different price-elasticity scenarios, while giving no thought to how much sense the whole exercise makes because the ensuing discriminant analysis is fun and highly

profitable. The four-color perceptual maps that come out at the end are worthy of museum display and indicate no sign of the respondent fatigue that set in during the fourth rotation of the third project. And another bunch of consumers have become non-respondents if ever contacted again.

**5. We too often allow our romance with technology to overshadow the art of asking questions.** We surely ask job applicants for a research position about their computer skills, but I'd put these second to their analytic and writing abilities.

Now I wouldn't deny for a minute that technologically there is a lot of good stuff going on in survey research today. But even though technological advances are important, they create their own problems, such as the temptation to believe that putting your data through some fancy computer model will produce the best solution to the problem under study, thus relieving you of the necessity for applying sound judgment. This is like the bachelor who wanted the perfect mate and took the route of asking the computer to locate her. He told the computer he wanted someone who is small and cute, loves water sports, and enjoys group activities. The computer processed these data and out came the solution: Marry a penguin.

I know of no computer program that will transform data from an inept questionnaire into a meaningful report.

**The next time a client tells you that focus groups are all that's needed, [remind them that] the Edsel was a focus group success.**

**6. We misuse and overuse focus groups**. They look easy — any idiot can sit around a table and talk to people —- and a couple of groups are a lot cheaper than a quantitative study. So why not go that route? After all the *Wall Street Journal* writes front page stories about focus groups to tell us how Americans felt about some pretty important issues. One expert in this area tells us that "a focus group is no more a simple group discussion than a group therapy session is a simple group discussion." I strongly recommend that we don't forget this.

The next time a client tells you that focus groups are all that's needed (obviously the misuse of focus groups is always the client's fault, never ours), relate this little story: It has been reported that when the Taurus automobile was first tested in focus groups, it bombed. People called it a "jelly bean." The Edsel, however, was a focus group success. I strongly recommend that you don't forget that either.

**7. We are not as concerned as we should be about refusal rates**. As mentioned earlier, we sure are concerned about sampling error. We conduct a thoroughly well-designed survey among the general public on a serious issue for a client who is going to use the results in a perfectly legitimate manner — nirvana. And with a straight face we report to our client that the sampling error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. Got that? Not 3 percentage points, but 2.7 percentage points. God, we're good — and our client can happily report this at the press conference where the surveys are released for all the world to marvel at.

But the dirty little secret that we've kept to ourselves is that the refusal rate for the survey was 58 percent. What's that do to the concept of sampling error? We are following our commander-in-chief's policy for the military: Don't ask, don't tell. That policy is no more ethical for us than it is for him.

We are losing a precious resource — our respondents. We have learned well how to more effectively disturb more people at an inconvenient time — and then blame them for being uncooperative — and we have learned how to bore them unmercifully and insult their intelligence when they do cooperate.

**We are losing a precious resource — our respondents. We have learned well how to more effectively disturb more people at an inconvenient time — and then blame them for being uncooperative.**

The respondent cooperation problem, of course, is not entirely of our own making. In addition to increased requests on our part for survey participation, the growth of telemarketing, even when carried out legitimately, competes for the public's time. Also, changing lifestyles — such as the increase in single person households and dual-income households — have resulted in many people having less discretionary time and jealously guarding what they have. But I believe we have made inadequate efforts to respond effectively to these changes, as well as to those behaviors of ours that we know play a role in reduced cooperation.

For example, we probably can reduce refusals somewhat by doing a better job of drawing a potential respondent in through an introduction that better explains what the interview is about and something of its purpose; by allowing interviewers to be more flexible in their initial contact with a potential respondent, rather than slavishly following a prepared script; by making an adequate number of callbacks; more effort to schedule interviewing times that are convenient for respondents; and by a continual effort to control questionnaire length.

However, at least for those of us in the commercial world, it's all too easy when under the dual constraints of time and budget to just continue to do things as before rather than reflect on and experiment with procedures that might improve cooperation rates, resulting in better research, and therefore having a positive financial impact in the long run, resulting in better profits.

**8. We don't pay enough attention to our interviewers.** This wart follows from the problem of refusal rates. Mentioning this will not endear me to our chief financial officer or to anyone who sees research as a business first and a profession second — certainly not the view of the pioneers in our business — George Gallup, Arch Crossley, Elmo Roper, Alfred Politz. These were men of substance and integrity who, while engaged in selling their services, nevertheless gave top priority to quality research.

Back to the interviewer, though I couldn't resist that pertinent digression. Let's not forget that for most people it is the interviewer who is the only visible aspect of the research process. It is the interviewer who must gain the public's participation in

our research projects, and respondent cooperation depends heavily on the initial impression made by the interviewer. Too many tend to see the interviewers at the bottom of the food chain. But it is their skills— or lack thereof — that determine the quality of the data gathered, and thus the value of the whole research effort.

Sitting back comfortably in our offices, it's easy to forget the interviewer — particularly since, as is too often the case today, researchers have never had the experience. They want to go from Harvard to vice president, skipping a few important and instructive steps in between.

I suggest that we had better raise our level of concern about how we recruit, train, motivate, supervise, and remunerate those who collect data.

My last two warts are of a different nature, are related, and essentially pertain to the world of commercial research.

**9. We have a tendency in the commercial survey world to call ourselves "suppliers" or "vendors" and also to allow our clients to do so.** I have been voicing my opinions on this wart for some time. The world is full of suppliers and vendors — you call them, order the product, they deliver it. One customer is no different from the next. Professionals, however, have special knowledge, special skills and thoughtfully and differentially apply them to the particular needs and problems of each individual client. We are professionals — and when we think of ourselves otherwise, our self-esteem suffers and when we refer to ourselves otherwise, our external image suffers. When clients regard us as suppliers, they treat us as suppliers. And if you have been in this business for any length of time, you should have experienced the difference in the relationship with a client who regards you as a supplier and one who regards you as a professional.

**10. The last wart is the lowest bid mentality on the part of clients, a mentality to which we unfortunately contribute.** Obtaining the best value for the money spent certainly makes sense, thus competitive bidding seems quite logical on the surface, particularly as clients' budgets are being tightened. As with most business practices, however, it can be abused so that the lowest bid is not the best value, and the bidding process takes place on the supplier rather than the professional level. While much of this problem rests with the client, we contribute to it — both passively and actively. A tempting reaction to competitive bidding is simply to declare that it is not a valid approach for the purchase of professional services, and that it is demeaning to our professional status. While there is truth in this posture, it ignores the realities of the marketplace. Nevertheless, the system can be fair and equitable — and we have responsibilities to insure, as best as possible, that it is so. For example, don't hesitate to press the client for as much specificity as possible, giving you as firm a basis as possible for costing and also causing the client to think through the proposed project early on, which is not always the case.

Also, ask how many bids are being requested and from whom and don't hesitate to refuse to respond to a request that was sent out wholesale. This can arise from three causes: (1) A client who does not know who is and who is not

qualified to bid on a given project — so qualified firms find themselves in competition with unqualified firms — an unfair situation because, if the client did not know who was qualified in the first place, the resulting proposals cannot be evaluated properly. Going along with this reinforces client incompetence. (2) A client requests multiple proposals for what is nothing more than a brainpicking exercise — in effect, the gathering of much valuable information at no cost under the guise of seeking competitive bids. Going along with this reinforces unethical client behavior. (3) A client who is absolutely a price buyer figures the more requests sent out, the more responses received and he greater the chance for an unusually low bid. Going along with this reinforces client stupidity.

Given an appropriate bidding situation, our responsibility is to bid honestly. Corner-cutting that might be invisible to the client, but that lowers your bid, affects quality and does us all a disservice, as does submitting a bid known to be low in the hope of obtaining more money once the study is awarded and under way.

Quite simply, the fairness and efficacy of the competitive bidding system depends on the knowledge and, most important, the integrity of the participants. We can control our own behavior better than we do and therefore have a positive impact on the behavior of the client world.

So there you are — 10 warts to think about. Deliberately, I have not presented them in any order of priority or made any suggestion regarding their prevalence, and I may have engaged in some exaggeration to make a point. Suffice it to say I believe they are all serious and all occur — and we all, including myself and my company, could do more to prevent their occurrence. I strongly encourage all of us to do so.

# Defending The Polls: Three Challenges For 2000 And Beyond

**Kathleen A. Frankovic**

For pollsters, 1999 was a very short year. Of course, 1998 was extra-long: it stretched right into the first two months of 1999, with near-continuous polling about the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, and with poll results under never-ending attack. The 2000 polling year began before 1999 was even half over. And I can safely predict that in 2000, polls will be attacked again.

But we shouldn't be surprised to see our polls under attack. Indeed, polls will face three serious challenges. First: polls have become, in effect, "players" in the political process. Second: we can't change that fact, so we need to be even more open about what we do. And third: we can't ask stupid questions any more.

Let me explain what I mean when I say we are "players." I work in the media polling world, and for better or worse, we are the first line of defense for public opinion research. We make the research visible to the public, and that has been both a great strength and the trigger for much of the criticism.

Media polls have been important tools in allowing journalists to establish and maintain objectivity. When *Fortune* magazine began working with Elmo Roper on the *Fortune* survey, in 1935, its editor wrote (in the third-person) that he had "no preference as to the facts he hopes to discover. He prefers no particular outcome. He is quite as willing to publish the answers that upset his apple cart of preconceptions as to public the answers that bear him out."

We all know that media polls can do that. Witness how many journalists had their "apple cart of predispositions" upset by the polls they reported during 1998's Monica Lewinsky scandal. They reported them avidly and often, even though it was apparent that many didn't really believe — or didn't want to believe — the results.

I contend that news reports of public opinion "democratize" information: by which I mean that information about the public that was previously accessible only to the power elite — to politicians and decision-makers —- is now available to the public at large. As a result, many more individuals can choose to act on or ignore public opinion information than ever before.

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Hamilton Jordan claimed media polls “changed the rules.” He was chief of staff under President Carter; and in the early 1980s Jordan and I were on a panel together at Emory University, where he took issue with me, CBS News, and the *New York Times*, for conducting and making public our poll results. I asked him whether he had ever learned anything new about public opinion from us — anything that he had not already heard from Carter's own pollster, Pat Caddell. And Jordan responded, “Of course not.” Obviously, we had obtained much of the same information that Pat Caddell had obtained, only we had made it available to a wider audience. That's why Jordan accused us of “changing the rules.”

Well, the fact is: the rules have changed. And paradoxically, it is our success that has made us so vulnerable to attack.

Over the past 50 or 60 years, polling and polls have become generally accepted as newsworthy information. And there is a tacit understanding everywhere that polls are in fact accurate indicators of public opinion. If they were not perceived that way, no one would bother to attack them!

We can be proud of this success, but it has come at a price. One of our core beliefs has been shattered. We no longer have the luxury of believing that the world views public opinion research — the polls — as a neutral search for truth. We may choose to believe that what we do is impartial, but much of the country does not see it that way.

The politicization of polls is not new. Ever since public opinion results began making their way to the public directly — mainly through news reports — they have been attacked by people whose interests are served by rejecting the findings. There is a long history of objections from the power elite.

Back in 1824, voters in many states did not have a direct voice in the selection of presidential electors. But poll counts began appearing in the partisan papers — poll counts that suggested that the public might not agree with the legislature — their political leaders — in their choice of electors.

In some cases, counts of candidate support were taken at public meetings. In others, books were opened for people to register their preference. Some newspapers praised the technique. *Niles Weekly Register* said of a count taken at a public meeting, “This is something new; but an excellent plan of obtaining the sense of the people.” Another paper said about a poll book, “We would recommend to our fellow citizens throughout the Union this mode of ascertaining the sentiments of the people. Let the political managers at Washington and elsewhere know the people's will and, if that is not to decide the question, why let the people know it.”

But criticism was just as quick in coming, according to recent research done by Keating Holland of CNN. He scoured through old newspapers in the Library of Congress, and found that polls were praised mainly by fans of those politicians who were leading in the polls: Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams. But the polls were criticized by opponents, especially by the Federalists, who — unknown to them, of course — were about to lose the 1824 election and, soon after, to disappear as a party.

The Federalists attacked the poll book. How did they attack the reports? It almost sounds like vote fraud — or poll fraud. Their criticisms: Bad sample and bad response. The book, they claimed, contained votes of minors, of non-residents, and some people have erased their names! And only a sixth of the eligible voters participated!

In 1896, the Chicago Democratic party railed against a poll conducted by the independent newspaper, the *Chicago Record*. They called it "a scheme — one of fraud and debauchery, the first step to do away with popular elections under the law and place the molding of public opinion in the hands of millionaires and corporations."

What had the *Record* done? It had sent postcard ballots to every registered Chicago voter, and to a sample of one in 10 voters in eight surrounding states. The *Record* mailed a total of 833,277 postcard ballots, at a cost of $60,000. By the way, they got back some 240,000 of those sample ballots. The *Record* found that Republican William McKinley was far ahead of the Democrat, William Jennings Bryan. McKinley won; and in Chicago, the *Record's* pre-election poll results came within four one-hundredths of a percent of the actual election-day tally.

The U.S. Post Office has recently issued "The 1940s" in its series of stamps honoring the 10 decades of the Twentieth Century. And among the dozen or so iconic images of the '40s that are commemorated there is Harry Truman, the morning after his 1948 victory, holding up that *Chicago Tribune* with the eight-column headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman."

Now, Harry Truman had a real complaint about the polls. He called polls "sleeping polls" because, he said, they were like "sleeping pills: designed to lull the voters into sleeping on election day." Intelligent voters, according to Truman, were "not being fooled. They know that sleeping polls are bad for the system. They affect the minds. An overdose can be fatal."

Of course, poll bashing in contemporary presidential campaigns is common, but lately it has increased as a proportion of campaign content. If you examine election data bases compiled by The Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania, you would find that in 1988, Michael Dukakis referred to polls in just under 20 percent of all the speeches he made in the fall campaign. He said things like "pollsters don't vote, people do."

George Bush, who was leading in that election, referred to polls only a third as often as Dukakis. But in 1992, when Bush was trailing, he poll-bashed in more than 30 speeches: the equivalent of one in every four times he spoke publicly.

And in 1996, Bob Dole talked about the polls even more frequently: in one-third of all his speeches.

Perhaps the epitome of poll-bashing was reached in early 1999. The *San Francisco Chronicle* headlined a story about Henry Hyde and the Republican House impeachment managers, explaining why they did not prevail in the Senate: The headline read: "Managers Blame Opinion Polls."

Those who attack public polls these days treat them as players in the political process. The short version of this is apparent in what the Dole campaign said in 1996, when it accused media polls of interviewing "too many Democrats."

And that sort of attitude is not confined to politicians. As part of a larger study, Bob Shapiro and Ron Hinckley have discovered that many reporters, in their stories, divide pollsters into "Republican" and "Democratic" ones, balancing comments from each in order to appear objective and fair. Unfortunately, this practice suggests that all of us who do survey research have a political goal or orientation.

When people talk about “data” they should all be describing the same thing; data does not have a “Republican” or a “Democratic” interpretation. But when analysis is characterized that way, it reflects on all pollsters. In fact, Hinckley and Shapiro found just that when they looked at the variables that relate to the credibility of pollsters among the public — that is, to the belief that pollsters give “truthful information and honest opinions.” They found that those variables are all political. Whether or not one is a strong partisan, a Clinton voter or a Dole voter, is what predicts one’s position about the credibility of pollsters. Not demographic variables such as gender, age, or income, but political variables.

Hinckley and Shapiro's study was done in September 1998, when the direction of the public poll results were apparent, and the attacks from political leaders were among the fiercest they had been all year. But the perception of politicization — that there is politics in everything that pollsters do — had already filtered down to the public at large. What had once been the province of the candidates, of the people that we would consider players, is now part of the way the public overall views the polls.

Well, that’s one challenge, and we will just have to live with it. The politicization of the way we work is a given for 2000 and beyond. But that's not the only challenge we face. There are two more. But at least we can do something about those two.

Pollsters must, for example, be up front in telling people about our work. Our professional organizations (and there are many, not just AAPOR) have strived for years for greater disclosure in describing polling methods, saying what’s important for public polls to release. The public is entitled to know things like: when the poll was conducted, how it was done, how many people were interviewed, what questions were asked, and so on.

The effort to open up the process in that way has been fairly successful. Even the Political Hotline, which reports polls on an almost daily basis, actually refuses to print results from some polls; and it labels others as small sample polls. In the past, the Hotline cautioned its readers about one-night surveys, but the events of the last year may have legitimized the overnight poll. In fast moving times, as 1998 might have been, any day-to-day change (or lack of it) was clearly news.

Disclosure is critical to the acceptance of public opinion polls. It makes clear what they are not: that they are not self-selected, that they are not sponsored by any party, that they are not (or in some cases that they are) restricted to only part of the public. But most important, disclosure indicates that the pollsters are not hiding anything.

In the twentieth century, disclosure has been critical in establishing the journalistic integrity of the opinion poll, but that same demand for journalistic integrity has generated unintended consequences: chiefly, it has opened the door to methodological attack. Among critics, the more information they have, the greater the likely scope of their criticism.

The terms that we use to understand what we do are the same terms that others can now use to attack us. Even people who have little learning and understanding can talk about bias in question wording (and sometimes they can even cite academic sources). They can raise concerns about question-order effects, and about response rates. Sometimes what appears as methodological criticism is really

**Disclosure is critical to the acceptance of public opinion polls... [it] indicates that the pollsters are not hiding anything.**

political criticism: If you're unhappy with the results, attack the process. If you don't like the message, kill the messenger.

We haven't yet figured out how to cope with these attacks, because there are some core truths to them. We must be concerned about question wording and order, and we have always worried about non-response. But better methods, fully disclosed, are still our best protection against unsubstantiated attacks. I mentioned earlier the Federalists' challenges to the poll book of 1824 — when only a sixth of all potential voters participated. That sure sounds like a response-rate issue to me! And they even made a how-the-poll-was-conducted critique: the poll book made its first appearance in a bar! How can you possibly think those respondents knew what they were doing?

We ourselves give the public some of the openings through which they can attack polls. Sometimes we ask questions that can create opinion where there is none. Sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of controversy because, in retrospect, we asked rather stupid questions, or because we interpreted the results stupidly.

I said "stupidity" was the third challenge. But just as full disclosure of methodologies can counter claims of bias, there is a way we can take control of this challenge to our intelligence.

We don't always do it. Sometimes we are just too full of ourselves. George Gallup once said, "We can try out any idea in the world!" He was right, but with that ability comes power: a power that media polls sometimes take too lightly. Hypothetical questions can sometimes take on an aura of reality.

Consider horserace questions. They are certainly hypothetical questions, along the lines of: "If the election were being held today..." Potential voters are often asked to take us into their decision-making process: "If the election were held today and if the following were the parties' nominees..."

But times change between the poll-taking and election day. George Bush trailed badly in 1987 against the then-most likely Democratic nominee: Mario Cuomo. And Bush had a dramatic lead over every possible Democratic opponent in 1991. (Scarcely any Democratic challengers could even be found, at the end of the Persian Gulf War, when Bush had an approval rating of almost 90 percent.) Of course, neither of those elections were held on the "today" when respondents were asked to imagine for whom they were likely to vote. And that is a key point to remember, as we poll for the 2000 election season.

Let me suggest another reason to be wary of relying on hypothetical constructions. In 1983 and 1984, in the months before the Democrats named Geraldine Ferraro as their nominee for vice president, much of the campaign in support of her was based on a hypothetical poll question that was asked several times in several ways, but boiled down to this: "If the Democratic party nominated a woman for vice president, would you be more likely or less likely to vote for the Democrat...?"

One of the more frequently reported results suggested that more than a quarter of the public would be more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate

if a woman were on the ticket. But the party insiders who used news reports of those results to push a female candidacy forward apparently forgot to check on the respondents' party affiliations, or to analyze the partisan breakdowns of the respondents as a whole. Naturally, many if not most of those who said that putting a woman on the ticket would make them more likely to vote democratic were already committed to voting democratic.

The Ferraro candidacy was, in this respect anyway, based on bad analysis of the data. The overly high expectations later resulted in crushing defeat. Did members of the press learn from this? Some did; others didn't. And one reason why they didn't may have been that sometimes a story is too much fun to step back and evaluate what the polls are measuring.

In 1992, for example, well before the end of the primary season, the nominations of George Bush and Bill Clinton were easy to predict. So Ross Perot emerged as "the story." In California, Ohio, and New Jersey — states holding their primaries in early June — exit pollsters asked what would have happened if Ross Perot had been on the ballot that day. "The story" that emerged suggested that Perot was the "people's choice," at least that day. But he certainly wasn't the people's choice when it really mattered — on the day they actually had to vote for a president.

In 1998, a congressional election year, election-related polling actually took a back seat to polling on a matter of ostensibly greater importance. But again, "what-if" questions dominated the polls.

In the early months of 1998, we were asking such questions as: What if Bill Clinton had an affair with Monica Lewinsky? What if he lied about it? What if he committed perjury? What if he encouraged Monica Lewinsky to lie under oath? By the middle of the year, the questions ran to things like: What if Clinton had an affair with an intern? What if Clinton now publicly admits he did have an affair with Lewinsky? What if there is conclusive proof that Clinton lied under oath about having a sexual affair with Lewinsky?

And to most of these questions, whatever the "if" was, majorities of respondents claimed that, if it were true, then Bill Clinton should leave office. Of course, as more and more real information came out, the poll results took rather different directions. The what-if questions early in 1998 seemed to show support for Clinton's resignation and impeachment under certain circumstances; but that support went away as more and more Americans decided that in fact there had been a sexual relationship and that Clinton had, at the very least, misled and obfuscated under oath.

By the end of 1998, as the impeachment vote in the House of Representatives neared, polls asked what should happen if the president were impeached. There were wildly different responses — different from each other and different from opinions expressed after the fact. That alone should remind us that our assessment of what a hypothetical question means may not be the same as the public's assessment.

We demonstrated this last year. In a CBS News/*New York Times* poll conducted during the week preceding the House vote, half the sample was asked: "If the president is impeached, would it be better for the country if he resigns?" And 57 percent said "yes." The other half of the sample was asked: "If the House voted to send articles of impeachment to the Senate for a trial, would it be better

**In 1998... "what-if" questions dominated the polls.**

for the country if the president resigns?" Only 40 percent said yes to that. One reason for the difference is that, up until the time of the House's vote, nearly one-third of the public was under the mistaken impression that impeachment was the same thing as removal from office, in which case it was logical to them that Bill Clinton should just leave quietly, instead of being dragged kicking and screaming perhaps, from the White House. So support for resignation was much higher in the first formulation than in the second, when the two-step nature of the process was made explicit.

Of course, after the impeachment vote was taken, still fewer people said that resignation would be better for the country. I think that's because the issue was no longer hypothetical: Bill Clinton had been impeached, and the sky hadn't fallen. Only 31 percent said, then, that they wanted him to resign.

I'm sorry to say that the news we generate from asking what-if questions is too often news that we expect to generate. Whenever there's a military action somewhere, we already know that support for it will drop when casualties are hypothesized.

Still, media pollsters tend to focus too much on hypothetical questions, and even when we report the results with the necessary openness about our methods, that narrow focus can have negative consequences. Some have come to view legitimate polls by candidates and the media that ask hypothetical questions as analogous to "push polls," when campaigns (behind the mask of research) seek to plant negative opinions about a candidate into the minds of as many voters as possible. "Push polls" give voters negative and sometimes even false information in hypothetical question form. (A typical push-poll question takes this form: "If you knew about some nefarious activity by the candidate you currently support, would you still vote for him?")

Perhaps the saving grace in my three challenges — the politicization of polls and pollsters, the need for openness, and the need to stop relying on easy but sometimes meaningless hypothetical questions — is that at their core, there is a truly democratic question — "Whose opinion matters?"

In 1824, polls showed — at least — that there was a discrepancy between public opinion and that of the political elite. Today, polls serve as a reminder that all information is democratic. That *Fortune* magazine editor who claimed, in 1935, that he wanted any kind of data, whether expected or not, also said that the information he gathered should be made available to all. That willingness, and the resulting democratization of information, is still a key to the strength of polling.

When people attack polls, the only fix they typically offer is "Don't participate." And that is an anti-democratic fix, an elitist solution that, in today's world, indicates a surrender to the notion that only some people's opinions matter. Ironically, of course, non-participation works against the attackers' own agendas. They need polls to further their aims, since without some knowledge of what the public feels, they would be unable to develop efficient strategies. Most politicians and candidates simply couldn't function if non-participation in surveys were widespread.

Of course, if we take the question of "whose opinion matters?" seriously, we will have to work harder to reach people. We can't develop methods that deliberately leave some segments of the public out. The message that sends to people is very clear and very dangerous: that only some opinions matter, and that (their worst fears realized) we do just make up the rest.

And that would play right into the hands of those who hold with the academic, post-modernist critique of polls. To the post-modernists, poll majorities are not social but statistical. They're like a home movie, a floating sign, an image, not a reality. Internet polling, for example, as it's presently practiced, fulfills that post-modernist fantasy of polling as simulation. Murray Edelman, editorial director of Voter News Service, has described Internet polls as a "projection of a poll," using some people who have certain qualities (say, access to the Web and a willingness to sign up for surveys) to represent those who have only one or neither of those qualities.

I've spent a great deal of time here on the challenges we'll be facing in 2000 and beyond. But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that the polls wouldn't be subject to attack if they were not widely perceived to be accurate. In fact, so accurate are they perceived to be that reporters and politicians resort to citing them. And if there are no polls around, they will make something up that sounds like a poll!

**The polls wouldn't be subject to attack if they were not widely perceived to be accurate.**

In early June, Jim Lehrer (of all people!) said that the media, according to the polls, is viewed as poorly as lawyers, the Congress, and pornographers. Now, there's a lot of data out there about the public's level of trust in the media, in lawyers, and in Congress. And you can certainly quarrel about their relative rankings in public esteem. But there isn't too much poll data about pornographers. At least not in the Roper Center POLL data archive. And I certainly don't know of any poll where "the media" and "pornographers" make it on to the same list. (If anyone does, please forward the specifics — and the methodology — to me.)

But I don't think Lehrer was citing a specific poll, anyway. I think he was just repeating one of those things that flit through the public consciousness like an urban myth. He claimed that the media was held in as low regard as pornographers. Well, that might be true. Possibly it is true. But what's more important is that Jim Lehrer and at least some of his audience are now sure it must be true. Why? Because he talked about the polls.

The polls are the new expert in town. That's the good news, I suppose. But it's the direct consequence of polls having achieved success and accuracy. Polls give precision to opinion. "Counting" defines things. The reason particular race and ethnicity categories matter is because the Census defines them. Such numbers don't merely reflect reality — they create it. So in effect, polls create what public opinion is. The numbers in polls quantify politics in a deceptively precise way, and those numbers mean "objectivity" to journalists.

Numbers also imply expertness. Reporters have been seeking expertise — in themselves and in others — for a long time. And for that purpose polls work very

well. Reporters rarely say “experts think such-and-such a thing.” And as Jim Beniger of USC recently pointed out to me, reporters never say “academics think...” or “most professors say...” And yet we often hear reporters say “polls show...” or “the latest polls suggest...” How often does this happen? In 1996 alone, the phrase “polls show” was used 111 times in CBS News television broadcasts. And other news organizations were at least as likely to use a similar construction.

But what do the polls show? For many reporters, what “polls say” is the launching pad for an analytic statement: “Polls show that the public no longer supports the bombing in Kosovo.” Or “Polls show there is voter backlash on the character issue, but it’s directed at the attackers, not at Mr. Clinton.” In an interview, an introductory clause like that enables a reporter to appear as an expert and it is almost always used to position that ostensible expertise in opposition to the subject or his views. Typically, it takes this form: “Lamar Alexander: Polls show you stuck in sixth place. Why haven’t all your efforts to win the presidential nomination been reflected in the polls?” Faced with a question like that, it’s hard enough to frame a good answer, much less to challenge the underlying “expertise” associated with “the polls.”

And after all, “the polls” are widely viewed as accurate reflections of public opinion. For all the problems critics have with what we researchers do, that fact — that confidence in our fundamental accuracy — will help us get through in the next decade and meet the new challenges. If we’re ever ignored — that’s when we should start worrying!

We can handle the challenges. We continue to remind the public — nay, the whole world — about whose opinion really matters. The challenges that arise are almost all due to the fact that what we do is widely accepted as truth. And throughout human history, truth has always come under attack.

Despite ongoing questions about the credibility of the pollsters, and despite the attacks, the polls will continue to define politics. Polls both inform and elevate the level of public discussion. Polls are a way to hold up a mirror to the public, to enable individuals to understand where they fit into their own political system. And reporting public opinion polls tells readers and viewers that their opinions are important. That democracy matters. And that their opinion counts.

**For more information:**

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## About the Media Studies Center

The Media Studies Center, an operating program of The Freedom Forum since 1985, is devoted to improving understanding between the media and the public. Center programs bring journalists, scholars, media executives and the public together to examine the media's effects on society.

The Freedom Forum is a nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. The foundation pursues its priorities through conferences, educational activities, publishing, broadcasting, online services, fellowships, partnerships, training, research and other programs.

The Freedom Forum funds only its own programs and related partnerships. Unsolicited funding requests are not accepted. Operating programs are the Newseum at The Freedom Forum World Center headquarters in Arlington, Va., the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., the Media Studies Center in New York City and the Pacific Coast Center in San Francisco. The Freedom Forum also has operating offices in Cocoa Beach, Fla., Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Johannesburg and London.

## About AAPOR

The American Association for Public Opinion Research is an organization of over 1,400 research professionals from government agencies, colleges and universities, non-profit organizations, and commercial polling firms who are engaged or interested in the methods and applications of public opinion and survey research.

AAPOR is the primary professional association representing public opinion researchers, and has a strong interest in protecting and strengthening the credibility of survey research. The organization was founded in 1947 by such pioneers of polling as George Gallup, Hadley Cantril, and Paul Lazarsfeld.

## About NCPP

The National Council on Public Polls is an association of polling organizations established in 1969. Its mission is to set the highest professional standards for public opinion pollsters, and to advance the understanding, among politicians, the media and general public, of how polls are conducted and how to interpret poll results.

Since its inception, NCPP has sponsored seminars, workshops and press conferences in Washington and New York to promote better understanding and reporting of public opinion polls.