

POLLING POLITICS, MEDIA, AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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The bedrock of representative democracy is the ability of voters to hold elected officials accountable. Polls can play an important role in democratic accountability by identifying the greatest concerns of voters that candidates should address and the policies that voters most want candidates to support. Polling can also contribute to democratic responsiveness between elections by helping incumbents to anticipate what voters expect.

Dr. George Gallup, Sr., was among the most optimistic about the contributions of scientific polling to creating and sustaining a responsive democracy (Gallup and Rae 1940). Scientific survey research, it was hoped, would establish the consent of the governed.

This optimistic portrayal of the contribution of polling to election campaigns and democratic government has faced a steady barrage of criticism. Polls are blamed because elected officials overuse them. Responsible leadership, it is charged, should rely on independent judgment instead of following the public's preferences as divined in polling. This line of criticism reflects the doubts of Walter Lippmann (1955), Joseph Schumpeter (1950), and others about the basic competence of the public to possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and wisdom to identify their interests and the country's. Many of these critics forcefully argue for limiting the influence of ordinary Americans in order to expand the sway of experts and experienced statesmen who have the wisdom, knowledge, and training to guide the ship of state through an increasingly complex and threatening world.

Critics of the competency of citizens have been joined more recently by searing attacks on the methodology of modern scientific polling. Polling, it is charged, is incapable of providing accurate measures of voters' choices because of a series of intractable hurdles (from low response rates, to the growing use of cell phones, to an underrepresentation of younger voters). Flawed methods open the door to subjective, partisan bias, which enables pollsters to cook their data to favor their preferred candidates.

In short, polling is blamed for harming American public life on two fronts—polls encourage elected officials to abandon their responsibility for independent leadership, and they distribute flawed and biased information that fuels partisan fires. This special issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* assembles a wide range of perspectives to critically evaluate polling and American politics in recent election campaigns and the 2004 presidential race in particular. This volume,

which follows the 1984 special issue on polls and the media, addresses the major questions that have been raised about election polls today. How accurate are they? Are candidates and government officials poll-hooked addicts who slavishly follow the preferences or whims of the public? Polls and politicians are two elements of a complex process of political strategy and communication. The press is also a critical—or the critical—mediating element. What is the impact of the old and new media's large and ever-growing attention to polling? Does the press serve as a watchdog that ferrets out flawed polls and facilitates strong responsiveness to the public's concern? Or does it do something quite different?

In assembling this special issue, we were especially cognizant of the diversity of organizations and individuals that conduct, use, and publicly discuss scientific surveys or polls (we use the terms *surveys* and *polls* interchangeably). In addition to reviewing manuscripts that were submitted in response to the editor's call for papers, we also solicited shorter essays from pollsters and those who analyze survey data, as well as those who participate in producing news and who comment on news coverage. This volume offers an opportunity to take stock of "the polls," media reporting on them, and their use in the American political process at the beginning of the 21st century. In particular, this volume focuses on three important aspects of polling: the accuracy of polls, press coverage of their results, and their use by political actors.

Polling: Accurate and Under Fire

Despite the public questioning of polling methodology, the preelection polls at the end of the 2004 presidential campaign were remarkably accurate. There are, without a doubt, a number of questions about samples and the development of new techniques for conducting interviews. These questions require serious attention, but the reactions of journalists, campaign officials, and uniformed observers have often been mistaken. In truth, the final preelection polls in 2004 were overwhelmingly correct in identifying George Bush as the winner and were also fairly close in estimating the margin of his victory. Michael Traugott's article in this volume demonstrates that preelection pollsters performed quite well in the face of extraordinary scrutiny and heated criticism.

For more than three decades, scientific surveys have relied on the telephone to conduct interviews and on the broadcast and print media to disseminate their results. The 2004 election appears to have marked a transition, as automated polls and Internet surveys expanded, and the Internet and its chat rooms opened up new horizons for the dissemination and public discussion of the polls. The 2004 election witnessed a significant new addition to the traditional practice of using random digit dialing telephone interviews—namely, the growth in the use of controversial fully "automated" telephone polling (using recorded voices and touch-key responses) and Internet surveys. Automated and Internet surveys cost less money and may offer some advantages in terms of eliminating the distortions introduced by human interviewing. Mark Blumenthal, the creator of the well-known and informed Web site "The Mystery Pollster," reviews the opportunities and pitfalls of the new world of polling. He also suggests that the Internet may help make it possible to widen public dissemination of polling results, conduct experiments with surveys, and facilitate a broader and richer scrutiny of polling. New survey methods and modes of public discussion raise questions and challenges for future campaigns.

The public dissemination of polling results is no longer controlled by well-known experts who enjoy wide credibility for the accuracy and integrity of their results, as was the case when the Gallup and a small number of other polling organizations dominated the field of public polling. Today, polls and pollsters have proliferated, and the level of scrutiny has intensified. It is now a standard part of the campaign consultants' playbook to attack polls that show their candidate lagging. The motivation is damage control, and the ever-vulnerable target is polling methodology. A number of prominent polling operations came under intense partisan attack in 2004. This volume includes an article by Frank Newport, whose Gallup Poll was attacked by the Left-leaning MoveOn.org, and Robert P. Daves, who was publicly vilified and picketed by the leaders of the Republican Party because of results of the *Star Tribune's* Minnesota Poll, which he directs.

An unsettling contradiction has developed: while the polls have been consistently accurate, they and their sponsors have now come under withering attacks during election campaigns. The sustained effect is to fan unjustified public suspicions about such proven techniques as probabilistic sampling and statistical weighting, as done by reputable pollsters.

The Media Filter: Distracting Voters, Misreading Results, and Capitulating to Campaign Consultants

The press is everyone's favorite target. Often, it is unfairly blamed. This is not so in the case of public opinion surveys during election campaigns, according to the essays in this volume by premier practitioners and commentators on the press and its polls.

A casual observer of campaign polls in 2004 might have concluded that survey methodology had changed for the worse. After all, the problems with the polls became a regular media beat. From her vantage point at CBS News, Kathleen Frankovic observes that what changed was the press coverage, not polling methods. The result is that voters were often pushed offstage as the spotlight of press coverage shone on "the polls" and their alleged foibles.

Tom Rosenstiel, a highly regarded arbiter of journalistic standards, argues that the press treatment of polls both reflects a serious erosion of professional conduct and is contributing to a new debasement of the craft. In particular, he suggests that journalists are using polls to duck their responsibility to report hard news in favor of inserting their own idiosyncratic interpretations, which further erodes public trust in polling. Polls not only are diminishing the quality of campaign news reporting but also are widening the reach of commercial concerns into newsrooms. Specifically, polls on what readers want are infringing on the professional judgments of editors and journalists regarding what to cover and how.

In addition to "shallowing out" the campaign information that voters receive (as Rosenstiel puts it), the media's reporting of polls has regurgitated the crafted strategies of campaigns or grievously misunderstood the results. Thomas Patterson shows that journalists hyped statistically insignificant changes in candidate standing and have been duped into transmitting the images fashioned by the campaigns. Bruce Hardy and Kathleen Hall Jamieson study how the press was seduced by the Kerry campaign into inserting "stubborn" into news coverage of Bush's personality traits.

Millions learned on Election Night 2004 that President Bush won because of the surge of support for “moral values.” Although repeated often and widely, this conclusion is wrong. Gary Langer and Jon Cohen from the polling group at ABC News demonstrate that “moral values” is not a clear discrete issue and that its importance to voters ranks low and has not grown over time. The media’s mistaken interpretation of exit polls distracted the country from the real sources of the president’s victory and fuelled much distracting debate. Far from serving as a neutral transmission belt for conveying information, the media’s coverage of polling has too often distracted voters, been hijacked by campaign strategists, and focused on imagined flaws in survey methods.

Democratic Distortions: Polling, Election Strategy, and the Threat to Responsive Representation

Dr. Gallup optimistically saw polls as allowing election candidates to respond to the concerns of a majority of voters, ushering in greater democratic representation. The findings in this volume suggest that polling as a technique is increasingly a casualty of our time’s polarized politics and that the press tends to distort the information in polling, heightening distrust of pollsters and fostering confusion about the views of voters.

One of the paradoxes of contemporary elections is that election campaigns publicly vilify polling but commission extensive polling for their private use. How, then, is polling being used by candidates and political parties?

Election campaigns capitalize on polling to target subgroups of voters or harder-to-reach potential voters. Investigations by *Los Angeles Times* reporters Tom Hamburger and Peter Wallsten (2005, in press) provide riveting “insider” accounts of the Republican Party’s effectiveness in using precise information on individuals to target them for personal appeals to vote. According to internal GOP documents following the 2004 presidential election, the party attributed its close win in the critical Ohio race to using its highly detailed database known as the “Voter Vault” to deluge individual voters with telephone calls, invitations, and personalized mailings in order to turnout tens of thousands of new voters in traditional Democratic strongholds like Cleveland. The Republicans enjoy a significant advantage in targeting voters because they maintain centralized control over their data file; the Democrats’ data are scattered among state parties, labor organizations, and activist groups. (Under federal election laws, independent groups cannot freely share such data with political parties.)

The use of polls to microtarget individual voters for personalized mobilization efforts reflects a new grassroots strategic orientation and a significant shift away from an emphasis on media buys and television-based outreach. The change in elite mobilization strategy appears to be decisive in close elections according to the article by Daniel Bergan, Alan Gerber, Donald Green, and Costas Panagopoulos. Although the closely contested and divisively partisan election evidently contributed most to turning out voters across the board in 2004, grassroots organizing and personal contacting of selected voters made a notable difference.

The use of polls by modern campaigns has important implications. Instead of polling driving candidates to converge on the midpoint of public opinion (as the median voter model would predict [Downs 1957]), polls and other sources of information are being used to selectively mobilize support from targeted subgroups of voters. *Polls are being used to narrow rather than widen the appeal of candidates.*

What difference does the narrowcasting of election campaigns make to representative government? After all, a fundamental purpose of elections (at least in populist theories of democracy) is to create institutional incentives for government officials to respond to the preferences of most Americans.

Martin Gilens's article offers some compelling, albeit circumstantial, evidence that government officials are responsive to citizens but that it is a highly selective form of responsiveness. In particular, his findings suggest that elected government officials are most attentive to affluent rather than to middle-income and poor voters. The disparity in representation found by Gilens is consistent with a growing body of research. Larry Bartels (2002) has reported similarly distorted responsiveness based on income. Lawrence Jacobs and Benjamin Page (2005) show that the foreign policy preferences of U.S. government officials appear to be highly responsive to business elites, with less attention devoted to experts and little, if any, to the views of the mass public.

The narrowcasting of election campaigns on precisely targeted voters and the disparities in government representation stem from important changes in the incentive structure of American politics. For ambitious politicians, their primary focus is on avoiding the costs associated with compromising the core policy goals that are intensely supported by party activists, campaign contributors, and interest groups. To avoid the risk of electoral punishment, they turn to polls to craft appealing campaign messages and to microtarget voters (Hamburger and Wallsten 2005, in press; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

Restoring the Promise of Polling

The pioneers of scientific polling envisioned their work as promising rigorous precision, trustworthy information, and the expansion of democratic representation. That vision is threatened. The press has fuelled significant public doubt about the methods of polls by extensively reporting campaign smear tactics that have little grounding in scientific methods or the impressive track record of preelection polling. Candidates are using polls to select their voters and to fashion their policy choices. The overall effect is that the use and reporting of polls are distorting the process of democratic accountability and responsiveness that they were meant to support and strengthen.

The findings in this volume and in other research demand a louder public voice by the public opinion research community to challenge ungrounded criticisms of polling and, where apparent, the gap between the preferences of most Americans and government policy making. Pollsters, professional associations, and the press must take a more aggressive and public role in explaining scientific polling and defending it against ungrounded criticisms. While survey researchers may rather keep their heads down and focus on their distinctive projects, the standing

of survey research and its continued viability and funding cannot remain unaffected by the persistent charges against it.

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