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A Meeting Place

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Great Expectations: Polling in the Postwar Era

At the Central City and Williamstown conferences, where AAPOR took shape, the power of opinion polling seemed clear to the founders. The national public opinion poll was a distinctly American invention, but its creators saw its international extension as well as its use within local communities.

During World War II, the morale of the American soldier and the civilian public had been monitored through sample surveys, and polling was introduced or resumed in the liberated countries of Western Europe and in Japan shortly after V-E and V-J days. Prominent in these activities were many of the same individuals who had made polling a fixture on the American scene during the previous ten years. In 1946, the Gallup Organization had ten affiliates outside the United States, and Roper had helped established International Research Associates. After the occupation of West Germany and then of Japan at the close of the war, the United States led the way in encouraging polling activities in these formerly totalitarian nations for the purpose of fostering democratic participation in postwar governments. These efforts too were led by many of the same individuals who had directed the wartime surveys carried on through the Office of War Information and the War Department’s Research Branch.

At the first panel at Central City, “Public Opinion and International Affairs,” Stuart Dodd, then professor of sociology at the American University in Beirut and formerly with the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Allied Force Headquarters in Sicily, predicted that “a few years from now, facilities will be available for reporting world opinion to the United Nations within a month’s time; such polls will provide a much more scientific basis for international action than the present
journalistic methods of coverage” (National Opinion Research Center, 1946:6). At the other end of the geographical spectrum, the fourth session at Central City was devoted to local polls, with participation by Lloyd Borg of the Minnesota Poll, Joe Belden of the Texas Poll, and Henry Kroeger of the Iowa Poll. Borg stressed the public service aspect of the Minnesota Poll, viewing the local poll as a device for community betterment. The services of the poll, said Borg, had been offered at no charge to various interest groups, including the Inter-Racial Committee on Housing. Other “service research” projects included a study of banking habits for a banking group, a survey on tuberculosis, and studies of nursing and health problems.

In both the local and international arenas, participants expected opinion polling to enlighten both the public and the decision makers on issues; consequently, many speakers focused their attention on the interaction between polls and government. For example, at the second session of the Central City conference, Julian Woodward of Elmo Roper foresaw the expansion of polling in several directions. Polling, he said, should be used to clarify public issues as “an adjunct to the ballot box, designed to make government more responsible to the electorate and consequently more democratic.” He continued, “The ballot box is inadequate—the privilege of voting is exercised only once every two or four years and then as much on men as on issues, whereas the poll is the continuing ballot box.” In addition, Woodward predicted that more polling would be done under governmental auspices, in the international area, and in relation to mass education programs. “As a result of their frequent contacts with results of surveys made for government agencies during the war, administrators and Congressmen have now become accustomed to polls,” Woodward stated. Clyde Hart of the National Opinion Research Center referred to polls as a “public utility,” citing the example of the Office of Price Administration, which used surveys to measure attitudes towards compliance and as a guide to a continuing program of public relations.

George Gallup, during a radio broadcast just before the conference, outlined an argument he had made many times before and would continue to make:

I believe the polls perform a great service in this country in revealing at all times what the people think about the important issues of the day. Elections only come at infrequent intervals . . . and there is need to know what the people think in between election times. As a matter of fact, elections themselves do not always indicate clearly the will of the people. Some of the greatest mistakes in the history of this country have been
made in trying to read the will of the people from election returns . . . [for example,] the 1928 elections, when Herbert Hoover believed that his great majority was a mandate to continue Prohibition, or 1920, when Harding assumed that his great majority was a mandate against the League of Nations.

However, the conference participants were also worried about the ethical and methodological problems that polls would confront. According to Hart, there was reason to worry. “Fly-by-night” polls that could bring “disrepute to the entire industry” were increasing. A self-policing association was needed to enforce technical and ethical standards in the polling industry.

Some envisioned that association as having wide-ranging responsibilities. Gallup suggested an auditing committee, “with the authority to investigate all the activities of organizations having membership” in the association. He suggested that this committee be given the election predictions of all polling organizations the night before elections. The committee would evaluate the various predictions and determine the most accurate poll, “in order to eliminate the welter of confusing claims” after the election. Its area of concern would be limited to public opinion polls, and would exclude market research organizations, since public opinion polls “have a greater responsibility to the public for the truth of their reports.” Harry Field also suggested that the association supply a “stamp of approval, which would be carried on all press releases.” If a polling organization did not adhere to the guidelines, the association would threaten to revoke its authority to use the seal.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the Central City meeting took place at a time when the founders of opinion polling were riding a crest of public support. A war had just been fought and won—a war in which polling mattered not just at home, but also in the formerly occupied countries and in those defeated nations that would now be ruled democratically. Political candidates began taking polls seriously and even commissioned their own. The American Political Science Association noted that the academics did not need to worry about the study of public opinion, as it was in the “capable hands of Cantril, Roper, Gallup, Stouffer, Likert, and their numerous fellow workers” (Pendleton, 1945:761). And while many pundits were looking forward to the polls’ first disaster, few would argue that polls could be, to put it simply, wrong.

Not even the founders seemed to consider that possibility. At the 1947 Williamstown conference, the participants looked outward across the globe and inward to the local community, as they had in
1946, but not to the potential vulnerability of pre-election polls. In his keynote address to the 1947 Williamstown conference, Assistant Secretary of State William Benton said the pollsters were capable of solving a problem that both Abraham Lincoln and Lord Bryce had highlighted in the preceding century: how to ascertain public opinion in a democracy between elections. “It is now possible,” said Benton, “to find out what ‘the public’ thinks on any given issue or range of issues” (David, 1948). Julian Woodward characterized the polls he had conducted for Elmo Roper on taxes and schools on behalf of the city of Louisville as “an example of a city using polling techniques as a regular adjunct to city administration.” One of the more substantial claims made for the public opinion poll was by Paul Trescott of the Philadelphia Bulletin, who stated that his poll of Philadelphians on the issue of establishing an upstate water source saved the city a half million dollars—the cost of a special election.

At the 1947 session on “Polling and the Political Process” (the last of its kind before the 1948 election), all participants paid tribute to the polls. Stuart Chase, who described himself as a layman among distinguished public opinion researchers, said these pollsters “proved the validity of political democracy by establishing that the people know best. History would give them a crown of laurel for demonstrating the essential wisdom of the people.” Gallup could find ten major achievements of polls in the advancement of democracy. Crossley noted that the polls did a service by providing a substitute for “the smoke-filled room,” and praised “the keen awareness of the pollsters of the responsibility attached to their work and their desire to do a good job.” Elmo Roper proposed government-operated polls, run by people of “Supreme Court stature,” in order to secure public confidence.

But participants at the 1947 conference did note some potential problems with pre-election polls. For Chase, these particular polls, now that they had established the validity of polling, were no more “than so much advance dope on a horse race—exciting and entertaining dope, perhaps, but nevertheless, completely meaningless.” Though Roper noted that “the polls have validated themselves. Not just one poll was right, but all have been right over a period of three elections,” he worried about the impact of polls on the best politicians, who might choose not to run because a poll suggested they would not win. He cited the example of a state’s delegation to the 1944 Republican Convention, which voted for its second choice because “the Gallup Poll says Dewey can beat Roosevelt.”
In all of this discussion, there was one lone voice, Louis Bean of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who prophetically suggested that “1948 might offer a more challenging test of the ability of the speakers.”

The Presidential Election of 1948

The 1948 election did indeed provide that test. The three previous presidential elections, which were responsible for the aura of infallibility about the polls, had all involved a popular incumbent president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt—in 1936 during the recovery from the Depression, in 1940 with Western Europe occupied and England under siege by Hitler’s armed forces, and in 1944 with the U.S. itself involved in desperate conflict both in Europe and in the Pacific.

In 1948, Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman, faced an uphill campaign. Compared to the eloquent and charming Roosevelt, Truman was brusque and less than charismatic, and the polls had charted his declining popularity. The 1946 congressional elections had produced Republican majorities for the first time since 1932, effectively blocking Truman’s programs. The Republican nominee, Thomas Dewey, had an established reputation as a crime-busting district attorney, had successfully governed the state of New York, and had run a creditable campaign against Roosevelt in 1944. Still worse for Truman, he faced bitter dissension in his own party, and minority candidates on both the left and the right, Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond, were running independent campaigns for the presidency that threatened to split the Democratic vote.

Early polls faithfully reflected this situation. Dewey had a comfortable 11-point lead over Truman, and Wallace was drawing 5 percent of the vote, almost entirely from the Democratic candidate. Dewey, not wishing to jeopardize his lead, ran a “safe” campaign, avoiding controversy, while Truman campaigned with extraordinary vigor, berating what he called the “do-nothing” Republican Congress. By fall, Truman’s efforts had achieved some progress. Dewey’s lead had narrowed to 6 points, while 8 percent remained undecided. But the pollsters, like most social scientists, had been impressed by a 1940 Erie County (Ohio) study (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944) in which a panel of voters had been interviewed during the presidential campaign of that year. The findings were that most voting decisions were made
very early in the campaign, some even before the nominations; that the ensuing campaign changed very few minds; and that as Election Day neared, previously undecided voters tended to revert to their traditional party choice. No published analysis of this study (or any of the pollsters’ work) took account of the fact that after 1932, the Roosevelt elections were referenda on a well known incumbent, about whom opinions were firm and unlikely to be changed by a campaign. Opinions about Truman, as the popularity polls demonstrated, were far less stable.

None of the 1948 polls continued surveying during the closing days of the campaign. Roper, in fact, ceased polling on the election in September, assuming a Dewey victory a foregone conclusion and not wishing to continue calling the “horse race.” Though Truman was indeed closing the gap, a Dewey victory was almost unanimously expected by the experts. The final Gallup figures, based on interviews conducted between October 15 and October 25, gave Dewey a 5-point lead. Then, as the actual election returns began to come in and the Truman totals mounted, they provided a stunning surprise. Truman emerged with 49.8 percent of the vote, Dewey with 45.4 percent, while Thurmond and Wallace shared less than 5 percent between them.

The Aftermath of 1948

The polls’ failure to forecast the election correctly became one of the top news stories of 1948. Newspaper editorials, radio commentators, cartoonists, and comedians all joined in the ridicule. On November 4, 1948, the Washington Post, which had been the first newspaper to subscribe to the Gallup Poll, sent a conciliatory telegram to Truman, the text of which read:

You are hereby invited to attend a crow banquet to which this newspaper proposes to invite newspaper editorial writers, political reporters and editors, including our own, for the purpose of providing a repast appropriate to the appetite created by the late election.

The consequences of the 1948 debacle were viewed as potentially dire for survey research. According to Hadley Cantril, professor of psychology at Princeton University and Director of the Office of Public Opinion Research, “the man in the street, who had regarded forecasting by pollsters as a modern stunt, had built up a certain resentment against those self-appointed experts who were telling him in advance what he was going to do” (Cantril, 1948:310). An even more serious
threat lay in the consequences for marketing research, which was the basic business of all the pollsters. One large market research firm is said to have received some 100 phone calls from clients the day after the election, questioning the accuracy of the firm's surveys (Blankenship, 1948:326).

The general public, however, seems to have taken a more relaxed view. According to an NORC survey conducted in November 1948, after the election, a majority said the polls were "pretty nearly right most of the time in predicting elections" and only 23 percent said "their record is not very good" (Sheatsley, 1948:460).

Aside from public relations problems, the erroneous election forecasts raised serious methodological issues. What went wrong? Though the techniques and methods employed by the polls had received professional criticism in the past, it was hard to quarrel with a continuing record of success. There is no doubt that the pollsters were unable to conceive of possible problems. (Joe Belden, founder of the Texas Poll, was to illustrate this point with his claim to be the "first poll to go wrong." He miscalled a local election in 1946 and at the Central City conference he sought out those individuals he had learned his trade from to find out what he had done wrong. These experts examined his data and in effect, wrote his miscalc off as a fluke. They had no answers.) It was now obvious that a great deal more attention had to be paid to sampling procedures, interviewer supervision and training, efforts to measure voter turnout, allocation of undecided voters, and timing of interviews.

AAPOR was ill-equipped to deal with these problems: as a professional organization with no paid staff, it lacked the resources to conduct any kind of investigation. Furthermore, its Executive Council and the membership itself included representatives of the very polls that would be the object of investigation. There was an alternative, however.

In 1945, the Social Science Research Council, in association with the National Research Council, had established a Committee on Measurement of Opinion, Attitudes and Consumer Wants. This committee had already initiated projects relating to sampling methods, interviewer effects in opinion surveys, and the use of panel methods in survey research. Now, concerned that "extended controversy regarding the pre-election polls might have extensive and unjustified repercussions upon all types of opinion and attitude studies and perhaps upon social science research generally," the SSRC appointed a Committee on Analysis of Pre-Election Polls and Forecasts. This committee, chaired by S. S. Wilks, professor of mathematical statistics at Princeton University, and
including nine highly respected social scientists, was appointed on November 10, eight days after the election, and held its first meeting three days after that. Financial support was obtained from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Rockefeller Foundations. The AAPOR Council also met on November 10, with only seven of its twelve members in attendance. One of these, Samuel A. Stouffer, had been elected chair of the AAPOR Standards Committee earlier in the year, but had later resigned when he accepted appointment to the SSRC investigating committee. Another AAPOR Council member, Herbert H. Hyman, was to become an active member of the SSRC committee’s technical staff and would author an important chapter in the subsequent report.

At this meeting, AAPOR adopted a resolution endorsing the SSRC committee investigation and promising cooperation with it. “It is the sense of this motion that the Social Science Research Council’s committee will serve in the place of any committee which might otherwise have been appointed by AAPOR to serve a similar function.” The resolution further urged “all interested groups and individuals to offer similar endorsement and cooperation” with the SSRC committee. A press release drafted at the meeting pointed out that all three major polling organizations had agreed to open their records fully to the SSRC committee.

Working with unprecedented speed, the SSRC committee delivered its summary report before the end of the year, to be followed in the spring of 1949 by a book written under the direction of Frederick Mosteller of Harvard University and published by SSRC (Mosteller et al., 1949). The committee report was critical of the polls on a variety of counts:

The pollsters overreached the capabilities of the public opinion poll as a predictive device in attempting to pick, without qualification, the winner of the 1948 Presidential election ... The failure of the polls was due to neglecting the possibility of a close election and the necessity of measuring preferences very accurately just before the election to determine whether a flat forecast could be made with confidence.

The pollsters could have foreseen the possibility of a close contest had they looked more carefully at their data and past errors ... The evidence indicates that there were two major causes of error: (a) errors of sampling and interviewing and (b) errors of forecasting, involving failure to assess the future behavior of the undecided voters and to detect shifts of voting intention near the end of the campaign ... These sources of error were not new.

The manner in which the pre-election polls were analyzed, presented and published for public consumption contributed materially to the
widespread misinterpretation of the results of the polls and to the great public reaction to their failure to pick the winner... with the result that the public placed too much confidence in polls before the 1948 election and too much distrust in them afterwards.

The committee called for use of better techniques of sampling, interviewer training and supervision, and for more methodological research to improve survey methods, more basic research on voting behavior, greater efforts to educate the public about polls, more cooperation among research workers on common problems, and better training and opportunities for practical experience for students interested in entering the field. All of these recommendations quickly gained a place on the AAPOR agenda, as illustrated by the contents of the annual conference programs that followed.

At the 1948 Eagle's Mere opening session, just two months before the debacle of 1948, participants from a number of countries had expressed high hopes for public opinion research, and stressed its social and political importance, especially to democratic government. But at the 1949 opening session, the atmosphere was different. There were fewer lofty claims for the wonders that opinion research could perform. AAPOR President Elmo Wilson admitted "a setback, but by no means an eclipse," and the conference participants listened to exhortations to improve the tools of opinion research and to admissions that there was still a long way to go (Public Opinion Quarterly, 1949-1950:738).

The main evening session at the 1949 conference, entitled "Constructive Steps in the Measurement of Political Opinion," was chaired by Bernard Berelson of the University of Chicago. The speakers were Archibald Crossley, George Gallup, and Elmo Roper. At that session, the same pollsters who had claimed in 1947 that pre-election polls had proven themselves in three successive elections, and had therefore become unnecessary, now disclaimed the importance of election forecasting even more emphatically. Crossley suggested the most constructive step possible was to "stick to presentation of the facts and stop speculating, no matter how many editors and others ask us for forecasts." Roper said, "I see no social benefit resulting from election forecasting as such." Only Gallup indicated an intention to continue his forecasts.

All three participants in this session took harsh criticism from the floor. Speaking in the absence of Rensis Likert, director of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, Angus Campbell asserted that the incorrect forecasts of the polls had vindicated Likert's earlier criticisms of polling methodology. Specifically, he noted that the fore-
casts had been based on small and evidently biased samples and that insufficient effort had been made to study the opinions of the undecided and those with weak preferences. His colleague Daniel Katz also criticized the quota sampling method that allowed interviewers to avoid people who were difficult to find and interview, and the failure of the polls to ask open-ended questions or to design experiments to help predict the behavior of people who said they hadn’t made up their minds.

Frederick Stephan of Princeton University emphasized that the SSRC report “reveals sources of error in every phase of polling, but they do not tell us which had only a negligible effect and how much each of the others contributed to the total error. Hence we should state the facts clearly so that the public will not be misled to think that the weaknesses have been corrected and that there is no further danger of erroneous prediction.”

Clinton Rossiter of Cornell University praised public opinion research’s ability to “debunk” claims of pressure groups and to determine areas of public ignorance; he also accused the researchers of “a tendency to claim far too much for your sub-discipline as a science and an oracle.” He specifically criticized “the presidential and other election polls, which you should abandon forthwith; your failure to educate the public in the manner of handling your results; and your refusal to make available to political science the complete facts about your methodology.”

The pollsters at the 1949 conference all indicated that the problems of 1948 would in fact result in new concerns—improving measures of probable turnout, coping with the difference between a unitary vote system and the electoral college, probing for intensity of opinions, continuing polling into the last days of the campaign, and improving public understanding of possible sources of errors in polls. Gallup said he would refine the filters he used to determine who is likely to vote, and would scrutinize the undecided voter more closely. All the pollsters agreed on the need to continue polling close to the election, aware now of the potential for last-minute switching.

While the participants at the 1949 conference did not have the starry-eyed view of polling’s capacity to change the world as they had in 1946 and 1947, there was still much interest in the possible uses of public opinion research at both the global and local levels. Stuart Dodd elaborated on a variety of United Nations intentions for using polling data. Paul Lazarsfeld, director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, chaired a session on regional polls, with some of the same participants as in the 1947 session. Participants from Colum-
bia University, the University of Miami, and the University of Minnesota joined the discussion. One academic described the use of his laboratory’s work by state and municipal officeholders, while one commercial researcher asked for help from academia, especially on methodological questions, and offered his facilities for their research.

Lazarsfeld, who assumed the AAPOR presidency at the 1949 conference, urged AAPOR’s newly formed Research Development Committee to sponsor an institute on regional polls prior to the next conference. As Lazarsfeld described it, the committee “should work with the regional poll people and advise them. The institute would be not only a clinic and a training center but might also be asked to focus data on some selected problem.” Although such an institute never came about on a formal basis, Lazarsfeld continued to work diligently to smooth over the conflicts of 1948 and bring the two groups of commercial and academic researchers together in AAPOR. At the 1950 presidential conference session (an innovation of his), he shared the spotlight with Elmo Roper, who detailed what the commercial and academic worlds should expect from and could give to one another. According to Roper, AAPOR itself was one of the greatest aids to understanding, with its single code of ethics and its annual conferences at which the two groups could get together.

The 1950s and 1960s:
What Is Appropriate for Polls?

The early 1950s were to see greater limitations in the claims made for the accuracy of election polls. For example, the Gallup Poll reported Dwight Eisenhower’s lead in the 1952 election campaign in carefully qualified language, which allowed readers to speculate on the possibility of a Stevenson victory.

There was also less interest in polls at AAPOR conferences than there had been—academic and marketing interests were to dominate for awhile. However, at the same time, polling was being quietly expanded in politics. An AAPOR-sponsored survey of its members’ ongoing research in 1950 includes a listing for the Dade County (Florida) Pepper Campaign Committee for the re-election of Senator Claude Pepper. A study done by Ross Beiler of the University of Miami focused on opinions of the candidates, involvement in the campaign, demographic relationships to political support, and district breakdowns. The listing claims that “Senator Pepper took keen personal interest.
Study director submitted campaign propaganda analyses and suggestions and consulted on some state-wide broadcasts."

The AAPOR conference of 1952, the year of the first Eisenhower-Stevenson contest, brought out again some of the fundamental conflicts between academics and polling practitioners. Of the session entitled, "Studies of Political Behavior in 1952, Plans and Problems," at which Gallup, Crossley, Sidney Goldish of the Minnesota Poll, and Joe Belden of the Texas Poll were the participants, the rapporteur, David Wallace, observed:

It is truly to be hoped that "the pollsters" derive some sublime inner satisfaction from their work. For, despite occasional polite words from academicians and amused fascination from the man in the street, they appear to gain little else. . . . Not entirely undue to adroitness by [Chair Clyde Hart of NORC], the discussion resolved itself swiftly into a well bred but open debate between the practitioners of polling . . . on the one hand, and the members of the Social Science Research Council committee which examined the polls in 1948, on the other.

According to the rapporteur, Gallup, as opening speaker, perhaps to undercut and satirize the academic opposition, berated himself for operating without formulated hypotheses, for adding little to the sum of eternal knowledge, and above all for not verbalizing like a scientist. However, he said his poll would continue to provide reports on the 1952 election. Since 1948 he and his staff had gone far, he felt, in correcting the major sources of error pointed out by the SSRC committee. He was now planning a last-minute pre-election poll in which interviewers would phone in their results, to check on possible late shifts in voting intention. He had developed new lines of questioning to determine which way the undecided vote was "leaning" and to forecast actual voting turnout more accurately. He had demonstrated these new techniques in the 1950 congressional election when his results were within 1 percent of the final major party election vote, and he had fully reported this work in Public Opinion Quarterly. He strongly challenged his academic critics to conduct their own experimental studies and publish their findings.

At this time, there was continuing debate between the academics and the pollsters over the merits of quota versus probability sampling. Quota sampling brought opinion polls into public view in 1936 when it was employed by Gallup, Roper, and Crossley to forecast President Roosevelt's reelection, in the face of the Literary Digest's mail-in poll that predicted the election of Alfred Landon. Under quota sampling,
Interviewers are assigned to a defined locality and asked to fill special quotas, usually defined in terms of sex, age, and economic status. This method of sampling, as practiced by the pollsters, was attacked by many statisticians and other government and academic social scientists on the grounds that interviewers were free to select only the most accessible and willing respondents, and that because the method did not produce a purely random selection, the usual formulas for calculating standard error did not apply. Critics of quota sampling urged a probability sampling method, such as that used by Rensis Likert in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and later by the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center, in which a sample of dwelling units, and then of individuals living in those dwelling units, is randomly selected from a frame of listings. Callbacks are required if the designated individual cannot be reached on the first visit, and no substitutions are permitted.

Gallup and Crossley both expressed serious reservations about the practicality of using probability sampling in election polls. Gallup asserted that probability sampling would lead to errors in predicting turnout. Crossley said, “No matter who does it, you rarely end up with more than 85 percent or so of your designated individuals—and these only after several call-backs. You are then faced with estimating the remainder either through additional sampling or through mathematical weighting. Both involve new orders of error.” In addition, “If we were to use full probability, we would have to close our field [three weeks early] in order to instruct supervisors on additional interviews, or to apply weights, and then get our story to the papers on time.”

Predictably, the academic reaction was negative. Frederick Stephan, a member of the 1948 SSRC committee, deplored the “same as before” attitude that had been expressed by Goldish and Belden, the state pollsters, as well as by Gallup and Crossley, and predicted that “unless something is done to overcome the present deficiencies of polls, their shortcomings will upset predictions again and again.” His remarks were strongly seconded by Herbert Hyman and Philip McCarthy, who had also served on the SSRC committee.

There was at least one effort at compromise. Stouffer admired the pollsters who “were willing to stick their necks out again in 1952,” and he strongly endorsed Gallup’s entreaty that the academicians move up into the firing line and conduct experimental studies in their own cities and precincts: “Let experiment and publish be the campus byword.” NORC’s Clyde Hart seconded this suggestion.

This was to be the last of those combative sessions for awhile. Before the next conference, in 1953, a poll of AAPOR members was taken on
topics preferred for the program. The top vote-getter was Motivation Research, followed by Public Opinion and the Social Sciences, Progress in Projective Techniques, and Measuring Advertising Effectiveness. Molding Public Opinion in Presidential Elections was far down the list. There was no proposed panel on the 1952 election and its attendant polls. Two proposals that received fewer than twelve votes and were therefore dropped were Newspaper Polls, a popular subject of the past, and Sampling Techniques, which were the focus of the arguments in the 1952 election session the year before.

These changes in members’ preferences among program content reflected both a growing AAPOR membership and rapid developments in the field of public opinion research. It had been seven years since the gathering at Central City when survey researchers from widely differing settings first came together and overcame their mutual ignorance and suspicion. To avoid domination by one group or another, AAPOR developed a “tradition” of alternating “commercial” and “noncommercial” (i.e., academic, government, etc.) presidents; successive nominations committees sought to maintain a balance in the Executive Council; and the conference program chairmen carefully tried to arrange sessions that would appeal to both groups. The factions had lived together in AAPOR for quite a while now. Furthermore, the distinctions between the two were breaking down, as academicians ventured into the government and commercial worlds and as market researchers were more and more often teaching on university campuses.

Pre-election polls, once almost synonymous with public opinion research in the public mind, now represented only a small fraction of work in the field. Survey research had become a profession, and scores of topics competed for a place on the AAPOR program. Both the pre-election polls, as conducted by Gallup, Roper, and Crossley, and the complaints of their critics may have become a tired subject by 1953. AAPOR members, few of whom were engaged in election polling, were more interested in hearing about such glamorous innovations as “projective techniques” and “motivation research.”

With the pollsters now more cautious in their forecasts and more like the academics in their methods, it seemed an appropriate time for AAPOR to begin to take public positions on the use of polls, and perhaps to encourage the use of good polls by governments in formulating policy, and by the media in reporting public opinion. The early 1950s gave AAPOR with several opportunities to make public its concern with good polling methodology and to censure meaningless polls. But each time, the organization hesitated.
In 1951, Fulton Lewis Jr., a radio personality, conducted the Fulton Lewis Opinion Poll, which seemed to be nothing more than the solicitation of opinions from listeners. Council chose a “wait-and-see” response. Lewis seemed to have done it only once; the procedure resembled a “letters to the editor” column, which AAPOR had no interest in controlling; the final decision was to see if Lewis did it again. In the same year, a suggestion was made by Louis Harris, then of Elmo Roper, that AAPOR look into the possibility of networks presenting social science research findings on radio or television, but there is no indication that the proposal was actively pursued.

In 1953, Congressman Harold Hagen of Minnesota introduced a bill providing for the questioning of voters in each state to aid the federal government in the formulation of policy. At a later meeting, Council referred this matter to the Washington, D.C., chapter of AAPOR. The chapter was to establish personal contact with Hagen, express AAPOR’s appreciation for his interest, and discuss AAPOR’s reservations about it. In December of that year, however, Council determined that since the bill probably would never be reported out of committee, AAPOR should do nothing about the issue.

If AAPOR was reluctant to take an active role in pursuing government legislation or in castigating false polls, it could perhaps serve as a clearinghouse for research. In April 1954, Sidney Goldish of the Minnesota Poll and Joe Belden of the Texas Poll suggested that AAPOR establish a clearinghouse and repository for completed public opinion studies, including local and regional public opinion polls, and that the clearinghouse be the responsibility of the Research Development Committee for at least one year. Council responded favorably and asked the proposers to prepare a specific recommendation. That recommendation appeared in September and named specific organizations whose work should be maintained in the repository: the Washington (State) Public Opinion Laboratory, Texas Poll, Minnesota Poll, Iowa Poll, New Jersey Poll, New York Poll, Denver Post Poll, and the California Poll. With the exception of Washington, these were all commercial operations, either managed by a newspaper or conducted by private research firms for distribution to the press.

The proposed repository would contain an inventory of survey dates, questions asked, and published findings. It would also be a question-wording archive. It was envisioned that the AAPOR Executive Council would be the policy making body for the repository, determining which polls would be archived, and that foundations would provide the funding for the operation.
In April 1955, Seymour Martin Lipset, a Columbia University sociologist who was also a member of AAPOR, had obtained through the Columbia library school a small grant from the Ford Foundation to study the feasibility of establishing an archive for survey data. In April 1955 he approached the AAPOR Council, asking for the cooperation of AAPOR members in contributing to the proposed archive and offering Council the right to designate half the members of a proposed advisory committee. Council reacted favorably to this plan but in the belief that several members of AAPOR would be selected for the advisory committee in any case, it instead proposed to recommend the project and appeal for membership cooperation in its next mailing to members.

Lipset’s project never materialized, largely because the Behavioral Sciences Program of the Ford Foundation, which was interested in funding it, soon closed down. Meanwhile, the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, then housed at Williams College as an archive for the surveys conducted by the Elmo Roper organization, enlarged its operations to accept polls conducted by Gallup, NORC, and the various state polls, and thus to provide opportunities for scholars to conduct secondary analysis of the accumulated survey data that had been the aim of both the AAPOR group and the Lipset committee.

While AAPOR was becoming increasingly identified as a spokesman for the profession and as an organization committed to responsible polling, Council policy over the next decade was to avoid intervention in specific cases if possible, and to refrain from any attempt to enforce standards on delinquent polls. This caution by Council reflected a more realistic appreciation of AAPOR’s limited powers and resources. The Association could and did cite its Code of Professional Ethics and Practices, but it lacked any staff or budget to conduct investigations of questionable behavior. It had no authority to subpoena research materials or to compel testimony. Furthermore, there would be serious legal risks involved if AAPOR attempted to apply any sort of sanctions against offending individuals or agencies.

Thus, in June 1955, the Standards Chair reported receiving a letter from Norman Isaacs of the Louisville Courier-Journal asking AAPOR to undertake an objective study of newspaper reporting of elections. On advice of Council, the chair replied that such an evaluation would be beyond AAPOR’s purpose, but then suggested several individuals who might aid in the preparation of a study design.

In September 1962, Congressman Samuel Stratton sent a telegram to the Standards Chair that read: “In view of the fact that private public
opinion polls have featured prominently in the pre-convention campaign of the Democratic Party of New York and the results of these polls have been used to influence delegate votes we urge your association in the interest of the integrity of your profession to investigate the scientific accuracy with the highest standards of your profession. We believe that any persons involved in conducting these polls have a solemn obligation to make all information... you acquire public and to cooperate with your association in whatever investigation you may decide to make.” Again, AAPOR decided that an “investigation” of private polls was beyond its resources and purpose. That same month, two complaints were received (one from a private citizen) about a poll conducted by the mayor of Englewood, New Jersey, at a time of debate over school integration. The poll was based on a sample selected from the telephone directory, with mailed ballots offering various proposals on combining schools at various levels.

One AAPOR member took it upon himself to write to the mayor and criticize the selection procedure as well as the questions themselves. The Standards Committee took no action. The problems the committee confronted are made clear by one member’s letter to the Standards chair, which characterized both issues as “part of the overall problem of research usage... This is like asking the atomic scientists to rule on the usage of atomic power in bombs. Perhaps ethically and morally we should exert influence in this regard. As a practical matter, I doubt whether it would do any good. In essence, I feel that each individual researcher is ultimately going to be responsible for not only his own activities but also for those of his client in the field of research.”

Council was willing to take action (although it was stressed that it was individual action on the part of Council members) when there was a direct threat to the ability of public opinion researchers to carry out their work. In 1963, the Texas legislature passed what became known as the “anti-Belden bill,” in reaction to surveys conducted before the 1962 state elections by Joe Belden of the Texas Poll. The bill provided for the filing with the state within seven days after publication of the data (the morning after, if within seven days of an election), information about the sponsor and the fees paid, and what might be regarded as proprietary information about the methodology of the poll. Fines for noncompliance were to range between $500 and $10,000. There were no hearings, because the legislature deemed the bill to be of an “emergency” nature. Council sent a letter, approved by all members present, to the speaker of the Texas House, urging him not to allow a vote on the bill until “further consideration has been devoted to its pro-
visions and possible consequences, and until members of our association shall have had an opportunity to present our views at a public hearing.” Eventually, the House passed a bill that exempted newspapers, radio and television firms, and political parties from its provisions, leaving Belden as the sole individual to whom its terms applied. The bill did not take effect. The Governor of Texas, John Connally, vetoed the legislation. Belden’s experience led him to produce a guide to public opinion research, to be distributed to legislators and members of the press.

Off and on in the ensuing years, Council confronted the difficulties of its ambiguous role vis-à-vis public polls. The 1965–66 Executive Council planned possible news articles about polls to counteract what it considered “adverse publicity to survey research.” Concern about the implications of non-representative (and what it called “dubious”) pre-election polls was dealt with by the unanimous passing of a resolution about pre-election polls, proposed by president-elect Leo Bogart, of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau. The resolution read:

Election forecasts may have political consequences both in the strategy of candidates and the response of the public. Pre-election polling is one of the most complex, difficult and hazardous tasks that can be set before even the most competent practitioner of opinion research. Yet candidates and public alike often fail to distinguish between polls which are conducted according to professional standards and those which are not. Valid polling does not rest on the number of interviews. It requires that meaningful questions be asked by well trained interviewers, and that samples be selected to be properly representative of the voting population. We strongly deplore the use of the term “pre-election poll” to encompass statistics resulting from street-corner interviews, mail ballots and other methods which are known to produce haphazard or biased results in election forecasting.

This resolution presents AAPOR in its best light in its handling of the polls. It could take general positions about desirable methods and appropriate analyses. It was less good at dealing with the merits and demerits of specific cases.

Council struggled with its specific roles over the next year. In 1966–67, it would admit an inability to serve as a volunteer clearinghouse for professional help on surveys of public interest, and would not pursue a proposal that AAPOR sponsor surveys on social values, but it would reconsider how to deal with congressional mail surveys. It was, however, to take a major step forward by beginning the consideration of standards of disclosure for public opinion polls.
AAPOR took this action at a time when the publicity accorded to public opinion polls was rising back toward pre-1948 levels, and outside of AAPOR George Gallup was beginning the effort to establish more industry self-policing activity. His activity would result eventually in the formation of the National Council on Public Polls. The AAPOR Standards Committee Chair, Irving Crespi, described to Council why his committee saw a need for standards in the reporting of polls. Crespi noted the general lack of methodological information in news releases of poll results, and the refusal of some polling organizations even to tell their clients the methodological details of political studies conducted (at presumably paid for) for them. The problems of newspaper non-reporting of polling methods were demonstrated clearly when Herbert Abelson reported on Opinion Research Corporation’s clippings of news items reporting poll results. In a three-month period, there were an average of twenty stories a month in New York papers, none of which provided adequate disclosure of survey methods.

The proposed AAPOR Standards of Disclosure would require that releases report the sampling, interviewing, training, supervisory, and analytic procedures that were carried out in connection with reported surveys. The proposed standards were agreed to in principle by Council, and brought up at the general business meeting of the conference the next day. The business meeting authorized mailing each AAPOR member the relevant materials, and soliciting member comments before adoption of the Standards Committee proposals.

The Standards of Disclosure were officially adopted in September 1967. Formal promulgation to the membership and to the press took place at the 1968 conference. In addition to information about sample size, interviewing dates, question wording, sampling error, and type of interviewing, the standards required that the identity of the sponsor of the survey be published. Later Council meetings were to underscore the responsibility of the party releasing the study to ensure that the standards of disclosure were complied with.

The Late 1960s: Activism in an Activist Age

The late 1960s were a difficult time for AAPOR and the polls. In 1968, there even was a “scandal” that brought back memories of 1948. Although concerns about media polls did result in the active promulgation of standards of disclosure and the creation of the National Council on Public Polls (which would hold meetings concurrently with
AAPOR for a number of years), polling would be threatened both by
government and by itself.

The governmental worry came from Congressman Lucien Nedzi, a
Democrat representing the state of Michigan, who proposed legisla-
tion requiring “Truth in Polling”: full disclosure of how and when a
poll was conducted, how many people were questioned, and other de-
tails. The legislation would apply only to published polls. While Nedzi
said he had no evidence that Gallup and Lou Harris (who was then con-
ducting and distributing the Harris Survey) had been “anything but to-
tally on the up and up,” he felt the public was accepting the polls vir-
tually on faith alone, and politicians were reacting to them as gospel,
without any real assurance that they were as accurate as possible. Like
the 1962 Texas bill, the Nedzi legislation would require the filing of
information (this time within seventy-two hours of the release of the
poll) on sponsorship, sample size, dates of interviewing, type of inter-
view, question wording, and results. Nedzi called for hearings on the
issue, and raised concerns about the impact of the polls, not just on the
public, but especially on decision makers. He met with AAPOR officers
in the ensuing months, and was eventually to participate in AAPOR’s
1970 conference, but his bill never passed.

Other politicians were to notice the polls’ potential partisan effect.
John Marchi, 1969 Republican-Conservative candidate for mayor of
New York City, introduced a bill in the New York State legislature to
establish licensing requirements for pollsters, and set rules for disclo-
sure of methods, including the filing of names and addresses of both
interviewers and respondents. Marchi felt victimized by the publication
of “inaccurate” poll results that he said had cost him votes and contribu-
tions. At issue were a New York Daily News poll that showed his
opponent John Lindsay ahead by 21 points, and an NBC News poll
that gave Lindsay a lead of 18 points. Charles Goodell, the Republican
Senator from New York and 1970 candidate for reelection, also felt vic-
timized by polls and introduced a bill in the U.S. Senate compelling
release of poll procedures. Again, the offending poll was that of the
Daily News, which showed Goodell far behind; Goodell lost in a three-
way race. Neither Marchi’s proposal nor Goodell’s came to anything.

While such threats of legislation were of continuing concern to the
organization, AAPOR confronted a more serious problem just before
the Republican National Convention in 1968. Two major polls, con-
ducted close to each other, gave contradictory information about the
electibility of the two major contenders for the nomination, Richard
Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller. The Gallup Poll said that Rockefeller
would be the more electable Republican nominee; the Harris poll indicated little difference between the two contenders. At that time, the fight for the Republican nomination was being waged on the issue of electibility.

A joint press conference by Louis Harris and George Gallup Jr. did little to end the controversy. AAPOR was urged by its Pacific Chapter (PAPOR) to investigate the facts of the incident. Not only did PAPOR urge AAPOR to do something, but it held a symposium on polls and the news media for members of the California legislature and the press.

PAPOR proposed that AAPOR (rather than the National Council on Public Polls, of which both Harris and Gallup were members) conduct the investigation, to avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest. Gallup himself suggested the formation of an AAPOR-NCPP investigative committee, “not with the idea of reaching a judgment of which polling organization is doing the best job, but to record for the benefit of ourselves, the public, and any Congressional committee or other investigating body, the full details of the procedures used. . . . The committee should be free to look into anything it chooses, and particularly to examine methods and procedures that may shed light on the reasons for differences in results.” In response, at its September meeting, the Executive Council voted to appoint a “special committee to investigate [the] apparent discrepancies.”

AAPOR’s Special Committee on Political Polls was formed within the month, although it was by then several months after the original problem. Peter H. Rossi, of the Johns Hopkins University, was named chair. Rossi hoped to extend the examination beyond the 1968 controversy, and to look both at the published polls and the private political polls. Council unanimously adopted a resolution that read as follows: “. . . AAPOR hereby establishes a Special Committee on Political Polls, especially those which are published, to investigate the methodology and public roles of such polls; and such Committee shall be authorized by the Executive Council of AAPOR to investigate such polls as it deems advisable and necessary.”

Meanwhile, the California State Assembly called a hearing on polling and a representative of AAPOR, Don Cahalan, appeared before the committee. He reported the formation of the Special Committee, the willingness of George Gallup to participate fully in its investigation, and AAPOR’s willingness to work with public bodies to help control possible misuses of polls. He (and AAPOR) hesitated, however, at the prospect of regulation. According to Cahalan, “AAPOR at this point is not taking a stand either for or against regulatory legislation; but it
is not taking a stand either for or against regulatory legislation; but it should be reported that there have been a number of attempts at such regulation, none of which has been passed; a major problem has been to legislate regarding polls without creating more problems than such legislation would solve—in the way of interfering with freedom of expression on the part of the media, and possibly even interfering with the conduct of sample censuses, health surveys, and even school testing programs.”

AAPOR was torn over whether or not to support regulatory legislation. Council tabled discussion of a proposed resolution to put the organization on record supporting legislation consistent with its Standards of Disclosure. And a problem that had haunted the AAPOR conference after the 1948 and 1952 elections was to emerge again: the conflict between academics and the public pollsters.

Rossi appointed, as members of his committee, Angus Campbell of the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan, a critic of the 1948 polls, and Jacob Feldman, formerly a methodological expert with NORC, then of the Harvard University Medical School. Rossi foresaw a broad mandate for his committee. His first memorandum outlined three goals. The first was to describe how polling is done, based on descriptions to be provided by NCPP’s members. The second was to address technical considerations in interpreting and using poll results, by updating the relevant parts of the 1948 SSRC study. The third was to assess the place of polling in the political process.

Rossi was never able to meet these goals. In fact, forty days after he wrote his committee that memorandum, he resigned as chair of the committee. His AAPOR mandate came into conflict with the newly established NCPP, two members of which, Archibald Crossley and Fred Currier of Market Opinion Research, registered strong objections to the presence of Angus Campbell on the AAPOR committee. In his letter, Rossi claimed that there was little reason to believe that the NCPP would cooperate with the Special Committee.

In his letter of resignation, made with “some regret, much dismay, and even greater anger,” Rossi made the case that the NCPP wanted some say as to the scope of the AAPOR committee and veto power over the committee’s report, and considered Angus Campbell and Rossi persona non grata. He drew this conclusion, he said, “from the fact that a large portion of the meeting [with NCPP] was devoted to questioning whether Campbell and I were sufficiently neutral.” He claimed that NCPP was “a protective association rather than a professional association,” and had been “perfectly willing to have a quickie white-
wash in the last month of the 1968 campaign, but now has second
thoughts about whether they want anyone looking into the way in
which the polls are conducted.” In conclusion, he warned AAPOR not
to associate itself with NCPP, “lest AAPOR also become known as a
protective organization. If there should be any looking into the polls, it
should be done by some more powerful and authoritative body, e.g.,
SSRC, rather than AAPOR.”

Robert Ford, of AT&T, the AAPOR president in 1968–69, asked
Council to consider the problem and decide whether to continue the
investigation alone, or with NCPP, or to ask the SSRC to take it over.
Was there really a threat to AAPOR members who were not involved
in public polling?

AAPOR then set up a new committee, very different in scope from
the first, and asked for SSRC’s help. The first of two resolutions re-
quired the AAPOR Executive Council to “create a Committee on Po-
litical Polls, advisory in nature, to serve at the pleasure of the council,
for the purpose of doing two things: 1) recommending appropriate
AAPOR actions or positions with respect to legislative hearings or in-
vestigations relating to political polling, and 2) being available, if de-
sired, to serve as liaison with any organization undertaking an in-
vestigation or study of political opinion polling.” Robert Bower, of the
Bureau of Social Science Research, then AAPOR’s vice-president and
president-elect, accepted the chairmanship of the committee.

The second resolution read as follows: “The Executive Council of
AAPOR, in its desire continually to stimulate improvement of political
opinion polling, requests and encourages the Social Science Research
Council to inquire into the methodology, analytic technique and re-
porting procedures used in the conduct and publication of published
political polls, and to publish a report of its findings.” (It is worth not-
ing that Council, at the time of this conflict, contained only one mem-
ber who was affiliated with a member organization of NCPP—Burns
Roper, of the Roper Poll.)

In 1968, AAPOR had made an effort, through the Rossi committee,
to conduct a study of the polls, deciding that it had a responsibility to
the profession to make sure that public presentations of polls were ac-
curate and acceptable. But in the process, it seemed to reopen old
wounds. Rossi took his charge as that of an investigator, and wanted to
produce a definitive study of public polling methodology that would
rival that of the SSRC in 1948. NCPP members clearly had more lim-
ited goals in mind. The situation may have been aggravated by the ap-
pointment of Angus Campbell, an early and well known critic of the
public polls. NCPP had been formed as an organization separate from AAPOR to carry out its own work. Many of the individuals involved in both associations remembered the academic-pollster hostility of 1948 and had no desire to see it revived. AAPOR was caught in the middle.

Eventually, Robert Bower, representing the AAPOR Special Committee on Political Polls, succeeded in interesting SSRC in carrying on a study of the role of polling in America's political life, emphasizing methodology and using the 1948 SSRC study as a model. SSRC wanted a "non-controversial" study, and AAPOR, after the Rossi experience, simply wanted to avoid investigating polls. Bower advised the Executive Council that it should wait to see what SSRC would do before proceeding on its own. By the spring of 1969, and with the understanding of the Executive Council, Bower still had not appointed any members to the Special Committee. SSRC referred the matter to its Committee on Governmental and Public Affairs, chaired by Austin Ranney. That committee, however, would have had to raise the funds to conduct a study, and was not really interested in the original Gallup-Harris dispute that had set off the inquiry.

Bower said that the dispute should still be of concern to AAPOR, but two years after the fact Council was unwilling to spend the time and effort needed to resolve this matter. It was suggested that the Gallup-Harris controversy be the subject of a panel at the next annual conference. Later, members of Council decided that a panel might not be the best way to deal with such an issue, and in any case, Gallup would be out of the country at the time of the conference. As Allen Barton said, "The integrity of researchers should be the subject of thorough investigations rather than public-adversary situations at AAPOR conferences." Accordingly, AAPOR substituted a general panel entitled "New Directions in Election Research."

But the Gallup-Harris controversy wasn't totally forgotten. That 1970 AAPOR conference contained a session called "Toward Responsibility in the Reporting of Opinion Surveys," at which the misuse of survey information by newspapers, interest groups, and the U.S. government was discussed (Public Opinion Quarterly, 1970:451-52.) Robert Bower's presidential address pointed out the increasing use of polls in adversarial situations, much as polls had been used to sell products years before (Bower, 1970). (The two worst abusers of polls, he said, were members of Congress and Encyclopedia Britannica salesmen). Mervin Field bemoaned the rise of a "new breed: the part-time pollster and part-time campaign manager." As he put it, "The mixture
of these two roles will continue to cause problems . . . [as] the activities of pollsters are still often the widely publicized standard against which the whole research profession is judged. AAPOR members have a right to know more about what pollsters are doing and to set research standards; and they need to become more involved in the process. Pollsters will not be successful if they go off by themselves and insist solely on self-policing methods to cure abuses” (Field, 1970:453–54).

By 1968 polls were an essential ingredient of both Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns, and of state and local elections as well. These campaign polls had become a concern of AAPOR’s over the years because it was commonplace for results from these private polls to be selectively leaked to the press by campaign staffs and to be cited by the candidates in speeches and in press conferences. Lyndon Johnson had been only the first of many presidents who would refer frequently to private polls to support the popularity of his presidency and policies. The problem AAPOR saw in this was that nobody except the candidate and his pollsters (and sometimes not even the candidate) knew who had been sampled, or how many of them, or exactly what questions had been asked.

AAPOR had just gone through a difficult time with the NCPP and the Rossi committee and with at least one highly publicized case of conflicting poll results. It had been warned by Rossi, an influential outsider, and now by Field, a future (1974–75) Standards chair, that it could not allow itself to ignore the way private polls were being reported. AAPOR members had always known that the opinion research profession was intimately tied to the success or failure of the polls, and had to pay attention to what took place in the pollsters’ world.

The 1970s and 1980s: Activism and Technology

In the late 1940s, with the end of World War II, pollsters were interested in promoting democracy through public opinion research. In 1970, with increasing public debate over the U.S. role in Vietnam, rebellion on many college campuses, and after years of struggle over civil rights, some pollsters again were interested in using their skills to solve global and national problems.

At its 1970 conference, AAPOR founded a new committee, the Ad Hoc Committee on Social Concerns, chaired by Barbara Lee. The one scheduled luncheon round-table on the subject “America in Crisis:
What Can We as Researchers Do?” turned into five. The possibility was raised that AAPOR could serve as a facilitator, aiding its members on issues of social concern. After two meetings, the committee reported to Council two major lines of activity: upgrading the reporting of publicly reported polls, and serving as a clearinghouse for research, keeping track of where specific types of research were being done.

At a Council meeting at which these concerns were raised, the chair of the Standards Committee, Sidney Hollander, noted that the Ad Hoc Committee’s suggestions called for a more positive, affirmative role for AAPOR vis-à-vis public polls, with the Ad Hoc Committee taking up where the Standards Committee left off. The Ad Hoc Committee on Social Concerns had several suggestions for doing just that:

Improve the standards of reporting of surveys to go beyond the present simplistic single-narrow-issue press releases; AAPOR conference sessions on having a better balance of content of polls; a special issue of POQ on issues concerning social responsibilities; giving awards to research agencies and media which do a superior job of reporting survey findings; sponsorship of seminars for journalists on the implications of survey data; using the back portion of POQ to disseminate more intensive interpretations of poll results; stimulate more recruitment of Negroes and Puerto Ricans into research.

It is not surprising that the Ad Hoc Committee chose to concern itself with polling issues. It had always been the polls and their public presentation that were seen as the most important reflection of public opinion research. When changes were needed attention turned to them. Even a committee whose impetus was the new politics rather than mainstream politics focused on this enduring issue: the role and reporting of the polls.

As Sidney Hollander had reported at the hearings on the Nedzi bill, polls mattered to all survey researchers. He said:

Publicly released polls, the part of public opinion research which is covered by the Nedzi Bill, is a minor part of the work produced by our members. Most of what we do is used for policy setting and decision making by government, by business, by institutions. We study health and educational attitudes and practices; we analyze consumer behavior and test new products; we measure reading, viewing and listening habits and preferences; and we apply attitude and opinion research to innumerable situations and fields of human endeavor.

But the visible tip of the iceberg represented by published polls is by far the most conspicuous and best understood part of our work. There is probably no opinion researcher in this country who has not at some
time referred to the Gallup Poll in explaining his work to a client, employer, student body or lecture audience. We know that our work is best understood, and that our reputations tend to rise and fall, with the credibility of the published political polls.

That is not to say that AAPOR members saw no other way to deal with the politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s except by recourse to old methods and old tools. AAPOR was worried about its own relevance, and the Social Concerns Committee was one manifestation of this. Council members also worried about attracting younger members. So the 1971 conference had a distinct theme: “Public Opinion in a Society under Pressure.” An entire evening session was devoted to Common Cause: how it used research to determine its concerns, how the organization developed, and the content of the concerns of the movement.

But there were inherent limitations to AAPOR’s ability to handle social conflicts and schisms. Just as the 1948 debate could polarize membership between academic and commercial, the issues of the 1970s could polarize membership between liberal and conservative. In fact, Council minutes suggest that concern about this possibility put restrictions on what the Social Concerns Committee could do. A proposed membership questionnaire was rejected by Council on the grounds that it was ideologically unbalanced. Each time the work of the Social Concerns Committee came up for discussion, at least one Council member would express the fear that AAPOR would have difficulty taking action without appearing partisan.

By 1972 the Committee on Social Concerns had become less active, although it was not disbanded until July 1973. Regular standing committees were urged to take on some of its recommendations: POQ to have a special issue on the responsibilities of surveys; the Publications Committee to consider a research seminar for newsmen; the Public Relations Committee to consider an award for an outstanding research effort; and the Standards Committee to consider criticizing poorly worded and designed congressional mail surveys on social issues. Other interests of AAPOR members in social matters were to be coordinated with the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) committee on social concerns, although SPSSI admitted it would not be ready to work with AAPOR for a year or two.

The complexity of the situation in the 1970s can be understood by examining two items of business before the Executive Council in November 1973. Hope Klapper, Chair of the Standards Committee, reported receiving a call from the Associated Press asking for someone
to come and explain what the public should know in order to interpret polls correctly. When she referred the matter to the Public Relations Committee chair, she worried about the lack of AAPOR documents (pamphlets, primers), and AAPOR’s responsibilities in the face of such requests. Second, AAPOR president Harold Mendelsohn raised the potential problems of issue or “interest” polls conducted by organizations that wished to influence public policy by releasing those poll results to the media. Such polls, which would typically address a complex issue by asking a single one-sided question of a less than representative sample, were often treated as plebiscites by the media and reported without qualification. Council worried that such “quickie” polls, whether conducted in ignorance of proper methods or in their deliberate misuse, could lead to a backlash that would discredit all survey research.

The complexities of the 1970s turned AAPOR briefly outward. In line with the standards of disclosure it adopted in 1968, AAPOR cosponsored with NCPP a June 1976 conference on “Polls and the Presidential Election,” in order to educate people in the news media about polling. The conference brought AAPOR back once again to face the issues of 1948 and 1968.

Though political polling represented but a small fraction of the work of its members, poorly conducted or biased polls reflected unfavorably on the whole field of public opinion research. How should AAPOR respond to these polls? Members of Council hoped that this conference would strengthen AAPOR’s educative role. Fortunately for AAPOR’s treasury, its involvement was limited to sponsorship and advice, not money.

Educating the press became a popular (though often unrealized) goal, not just for AAPOR, but for AAPOR’s local chapters. MAPOR (the Midwest chapter) tried to hold a meeting for the press in 1978; but only three persons planned to attend, so it was canceled. AAPOR planned a “Washington event” for the press; not enough people expressed interest and it too was canceled. In the state of Washington and elsewhere, similar sessions were planned in conjunction with newspaper publishers, but documentation of these is lacking.

The 1980 election year raised new concerns about polling and elections. This time, call-in polls and exit polls joined the pre-election polls as targets. AAPOR’s behavior was by now predictable. In 1980, it sent a number of letters to polling organizations (mostly identified with the news media) commenting on poor techniques, especially the use of mail-in ballots by newspapers. Like AAPOR’s letters to organizations that used polls as solicitation devices, these letters (usually from the
Standards Committee chair) sometimes were effective but more often were not.

There was also a new type of poll that would engender concern, not just because it was unrepresentative, but because of its sponsor. It was conducted for a nationwide news organization—the 1980 presidential debate ABC News call-in. The call-in used a “900 number” device provided by AT&T to record the volume of phone calls made to either of two telephone numbers. One number indicated that the caller believed Ronald Reagan had won the debate; the other number was for callers who believed Jimmy Carter had done better. The call-in poll controversy opened up a discussion of pseudo-polls that has continued to the present. AAPOR was forced to react to the new technology, and found that the only institutionally appropriate way it could was through letters of complaint and general attempts at education.

Call-in polls and others like them were pseudo-polls, and could be roundly condemned as failing to meet probability sampling criteria. But technology also led to another type of poll that, while methodologically sound, created what was seen as a more general problem affecting democratic theory and principles. This was the exit poll.

In the 1980 election, at least one network used polls of voters leaving the polling place to report who won the presidential race in certain states, and to determine where to place those states’ electoral college votes. After the election, some people claimed that reporting of results based on exit polls affected turnout in Western states where voting was still in progress. AAPOR worried about this too. At its December, 1980 Council meeting, a motion was passed to have the Conference Committee give serious consideration to two round-tables on the subject of exit polling: one on the methodologies of using polls to call elections, the second on the issue of “what constitutes reasonable release and on the basis of what data.”

Exit polling was a topic at every annual conference through 1984, when a plenary session was held that included the chair of the House committee responsible for legislation on elections, a former president of CBS News, and a civil liberties lawyer who was at that time fighting a court case in Washington State (which he won) against an ordinance restricting the conduct of exit polls. That session was tape-recorded, published in Public Opinion Quarterly (1984), and distributed to AAPOR members and federal and state officials. Its publication was expected, in one councillor’s words, to “position AAPOR as a standard-setter in the industry and serve a public education function. Legislation focused on exit polling is a growing movement and as this issue gains
momentum it raises questions about the regulation of polls, the public release of poll information and the conduct of polls.”

The proliferation of polls in more recent years has both increased and decreased the pressures upon AAPOR to act. Although neither Gallup nor Harris predicted the magnitude of Ronald Reagan’s victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980, there was never any serious move to “investigate” the polls. In 1984, both of these national polls correctly foreshaw a Reagan landslide over Walter Mondale. But the “polls” in the 1980s were no longer synonymous with Gallup-Roper-Crossley as they had been forty years earlier, nor with Gallup-Harris as in 1968. The advent of telephone interviewing, aided by random-digit dialing methods to ensure inclusion of unlisted numbers, had brought polling within the resources of almost any political candidate, partisan group, or communications medium, at the state, national, or local level. It was clearly impossible for AAPOR, or anyone else, to investigate every complaint that a poll was biased or poorly executed.

There was a flurry of concern following the 1982 elections, in which a considerable number of local and statewide polls were well off the mark. Both the Los Angeles Times poll and the California Poll showed Thomas Bradley with a 6 or 7 point lead over George Deukmejian in the California gubernatorial election, but Deukmejian won. Four New York state polls all pointed to a 10 point margin for Mario Cuomo, who won by 3 points. In Texas the polls indicated that William Clements led Mark White, but White won by 8 points. In Illinois the polls conceded Governor James Thompson a comfortable edge over Adlai Stevenson III, but the race was so close that it took weeks to confirm that Thompson had won. Burns Roper summarized these results in the Winter 1983 issue of AAPOR News with a lead article headed, “Election Poll Errors: A Problem for Us All.”

By this time, however, both the pollsters themselves and the students of polls were able to move quickly on their own to propose hypotheses about the misleading results and often to test them as causes for the polls’ failures. Scholarly articles in Public Opinion Quarterly analyzed the performance of the 1982 exit polls and the network polls and, both at AAPOR’s annual conferences and at meetings of local AAPOR chapters around the country, methodological issues were intensely discussed. As its name implies, the American Association for Public Opinion Research always has been concerned about polls on public issues that are released into the public domain or made available as part of the public policy process. How actively it has pursued those changes has varied.
References


Central City, Colorado, 1946: AAPOR's Precursor

Sites of Central City meeting: Teller House (above) Opera House (right).

Central City conference organizer Harry Field.

Central City participants in the Opera House. Anne Schuetz, questionnaire design expert at NORC, and Elmo Wilson, CBS research director, President 1948–49.

Inside the Opera House. Discussing, for the radio audience, problems of communications research are (from left to right) Dr. George Gallup, Sr., President 1944–45; Harry Field; H.M. Beville, Jr., Director of Research, NBC; Palmer Hoyt, Publisher, the Denver Post; Tor Torland, host Station KOA, Denver.

1983 conference, George Gallup, Sr. and Elisabeth Noelle-Neuemann.


Counter-sorger at work at NORC, 1950.
The dark days of political polling: Harry Truman proclaiming his 1948 presidential victory.

Pollster addressing reporters at the National Press Club on the eve of the 1980 presidential election. Left to right: Warren Mitofsky, CBS News/New York Times Poll; George Gallup, Sr., Gallup Poll; and Louis Harris, Harris Poll.

Calude Robinson and Rensis Likert played major roles at AAPOR’s founding conference at Williamstown, 1947.
Seymour Sudman, President, 1981–82
Norman Bradburn, President, 1991–92
Burns W. Roper, President 1982–82
Howard Schuman, President, 1985–86
J. Ronald Milavsky, President, 1986–87
Warren Mitofsky, President, 1988–89
Joan Black, President, 1990–91
Philip Meyer, President, 1989–90
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