

The Presidents and the Polls

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IN THE last few years, serious questions have again arisen about why public opinion polling is useful. Most opinion researchers have given little recent thought to this topic, feeling everything that could possibly be said on it was already said long ago, and that there is a consensus that public opinion has a major role to play in a democratic society. But there are those who don't know or who need to be reminded about the uses of public opinion, and I address this paper to them.

Since, in the United States, the president is the ultimate decision maker, I want to present illustrations of presidential uses of polling, giving what I think are appropriate and inappropriate uses of public opinion research in a democracy. To make my case, I shall use some historical examples. It is not my primary desire to describe the presidents, but rather the uses of polls. For this reason, my sample of examples is incomplete and the examples may be biased. Some presidents are barely discussed and no president receives a comprehensive evaluation. From another perspective, however, the examples do describe all the major uses and misuses of polls.

It seems hard for many to realize that modern public opinion research is now almost 50 years old. One can argue about the exact starting date of any field, but most observers would use the year 1935,

Abstract Since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, presidents have used opinion polls to aid them in being elected and as input to policy formulation. Several examples of such effective use are presented. Polls may also be misused by presidents simply to enhance presidential popularity. Such actions are generally ineffective either for increasing presidential popularity or for making wise policy decisions.

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the year in which both the Gallup and *Fortune* polls were started, as the point at which formal public opinion polling began.

This year marks the golden anniversary of a more generally significant event, the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as president of the United States. It is, of course, possible that the rapid growth of opinion polling during the Roosevelt era was pure coincidence. I don't think so. The legends of our profession tell us that the major breakthrough occurred because of the publicity over the *Literary Digest's* prediction that Alf Landon would be elected in 1936. It's a marvelous story but, at best, it is only a very limited explanation.

Instead, I'd like to suggest that a vital factor was the pragmatic character of FDR and the brilliant staff that he collected around him that provided the atmosphere in which the seedling profession of opinion research could grow and flourish. Just as FDR reached out to the American people with his fireside chats, he listened to them through opinion polls.

Although he had no earlier experience to guide him, FDR instinctively used opinion research as I believe it should be used, not to promote programs and policies because they would be popular, but to guide the president as to how to lead the American people. Roosevelt's use of opinion data is illustrated in the fascinating and informative memoir of Hadley Cantril, *The Human Dimension: Experiences in Policy Research* (1967).

Roosevelt's first use of polls was in 1940 when he carefully studied public attitudes on aid to England. He requested that the same questions be asked periodically so that trends could be followed. The president was most particularly concerned with American opinion as to whether the Neutrality Law should be changed to permit American ships to carry war supplies to England, whether the United States should lend war materials to the British through a Lend-Lease Bill, and general attitudes on his efforts to help Britain. He was always ahead, but not too far ahead of public sentiments.

After Germany invaded Russia, Gallup used a split ballot to see what the public thought about aid to Britain. The first slanted question was: "Some people say that since Germany is now fighting Russia, as well as Britain, it is not as necessary for this country to help Britain. Do you agree or disagree with this?" Seventy-three percent of the American people disagreed with the proposition. The other question, slanted a different way, was: "Some people say that, since Germany will probably defeat Russia within a few weeks and then turn her full strength against Britain, it is more important than ever that we help Britain. Do you agree or disagree with this?" Seventy-one percent agreed.

It was quite clear that opinion was "solid." Both questions revealed practically identical majorities in the same direction. Furthermore, analysis of replies in terms of the religious and economic backgrounds of respondents showed no appreciable differences of opinion. Roosevelt was particularly relieved to learn of the uniformity within the population.

A fairly simple example of Roosevelt's use of polls for domestic purposes was a 1943 survey of farmers. Those arguing against farm subsidies were arguing that the farmers themselves did not want subsidies. Cantril conducted a survey of a specially designed national sample of over 2,000 American farmers. The outstanding disclosure of this survey was the widespread ignorance of farmers about the administration's farm program, although farm groups in Washington apparently assumed that the farmer was well informed.

In the letter transmitting the findings, Cantril recommended that the primary aim in a speech should be clarification, sacrificing, if necessary, emotional oratory for simple phrasing. A few days after turning in the report, Cantril got a letter from the president commending the report as both surprising and instructive.

Cantril summarized Roosevelt's use of polls as follows (pp. 41-42):

Roosevelt regarded the reports sent him the way a general would regard information turned in by his intelligence services as he planned the strategy of a campaign. As far as I am aware, Roosevelt never altered his goals because public opinion appeared against him or was uninformed. Rather he utilized such information to try to bring the public around more quickly or more effectively to the course of action he felt was best for the country. I am certain he would have agreed with Churchill's comment that "nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup poll, always taking one's pulse and taking one's temperature. . . . There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right and not to fear or say what you believe to be right."

Finally, Cantril says:

I want to emphasize that no claim is made that the data provided the president were crucial in his decisions. But actions taken were certainly very often completely consistent with our recommendations.

Following Roosevelt came two presidents who did not make much use of polls, but for quite different reasons. Harry Truman had serious doubts about polls' accuracy in 1948 and was delighted to be proved right. It might be pointed out, however, that it was the early poll results that, in part, persuaded Truman that he had to get out and make the vigorous whistle-stop campaign that ultimately brought him

victory. Although there is little public evidence of how Truman used the polls before or after 1948, he was certainly kept aware of public opinion during the Korean War.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was clearly the most popular United States president in recent times. Given a steady high level of approval and the absence of any major policy controversies during his term, he seems to have made limited use of opinion polls. Nevertheless, there is evidence that he was briefed on public attitudes toward Korea and on Senator Joe McCarthy.

John Kennedy's use of polls is reported by Ted Sorensen, who was his Special Council. In his book called *Kennedy* (1965:332–33) Sorensen writes about Kennedy's political behavior and sources of political intelligence:

He was a president willing if necessary, to risk defeat for his principles, but he preferred preserving both his principles and his power to effect them.

Consequently, politics was an ever-present influence in the Kennedy White House. Kennedy retained in the White House his unusually acute political antennae, with which he sensed the public mood both quickly and accurately. He understood what moved people, what touched their hearts and what touched only their pocketbooks. He was good at distinguishing their momentary whims from their enduring convictions.

There was no single source of this sensitivity. He read every fiftieth letter of the thirty thousand coming to the White House as well as a statistical summary of the entire batch, but he knew that these were often as organized and unrepresentative as the pickets on Pennsylvania Avenue. "Mail, unfortunately," he told a 1962 press conference, "is not true as an indicator of the feelings of the people. . . . I got last week 28 letters on Laos . . . [and] 440 letters on the cancellation of a tax exemption for a 'mercy' foundation."

He also remained an avid consumer of public opinion polls. He did not commission any polls directly, as rumored, but Louis Harris and others reported findings of many polls taken for their political clients, and the published polls of Gallup and his colleagues were studied with care. Nevertheless, the president remained a skeptic. He told Orville Freeman that a survey of farmers showing Kennedy's job performance rating higher than his secretary of agriculture's merely proved that the latter was doing a good job—but that the whole poll was dubious, since it also claimed that Bostonian Kennedy ranked higher than Kansan Eisenhower. He told a press conference that a Gallup Poll showing 72 percent against a tax cut which produced deeper debts might have had a different result had it asked opinions on a tax cut necessary to prevent a recession, unemployment and consequently greater debts.

He relied on more than mail, public petitions and polls. He talked with hundreds of people every week in the White House. He read newspapers and magazines from all over the country. He judged the reactions of his crowds when he traveled (although not necessarily their size, which was partisan and planned). He observed the pressures reflected in Congress and heard reports from his Cabinet on their trips. But somehow his political intuition was an amalgamation of all these that was greater than the sum of its parts.

It is obvious that no president will rely entirely on public opinion polls but will depend on all the sources of information about what different publics want. Among all the sources, however, only the polls and the president's closest friends provide disinterested information, and there is always at least a little doubt about friends.

Kennedy made one of the major errors in his reign of 1,000 days when he approved the invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. This invasion was based on the hope that the Cuban population would rise up in revolt and join in the invasion. The reality was that the Cuban public was strongly behind the Castro regime at that time. A careful survey of Cuban public opinion in urban areas conducted in 1960 indicated that 86 percent of the population was pro-Castro and only about 10 percent was negative. This report was published in July 1960 and widely disseminated with copies going to the White House and State Department. Since this was at the end of the Eisenhower administration, it is possible that the report got lost in the change of administrations and was never seen in time by the Kennedy advisors. One need not believe strongly in conspiracy theories, however, to speculate that this report was buried within the CIA and State Departments because it disagreed with some revealed truths that were held by anti-Castro supporters.

Lyndon Johnson, whose hero had always been FDR, used the polls as had his Democratic predecessors. In the period just after his election in 1964 he was at his height of popularity in the polls and was encouraged by this as well as his own sense of right to press through Congress the major civil rights legislation and the war on poverty for which he is remembered. But, as he writes in his own memoirs, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (1971: 440–41) he ignored the polls when he attempted to stem inflation with a tax increase in 1966. He says: "On the subject of taxes, the people were extremely vocal. Mail on the hill was running heavily against a tax increase. [In a footnote, he adds] Even as late as January, 1968 a Gallup Poll showed that 79 percent of the American people were opposed to raising taxes."

Nevertheless, on the basis of advice from the Council of Economic Advisors, he continued to press for a tax increase during the period 1966–1968. As he put it: "I was aware that history's judgment would be based not on the Gallup Poll of 1966 or 1967 or 1968 but on what I did to steer the economy between the shoals of recession and the rocks of runaway inflation."

The great tragedy of the Johnson administration was, of course, Viet Nam. In the period 1964–1965, as the United States greatly expanded its forces, public opinion was still uncrystallized, but gener-

ally positive to the United States involvement. Public opinion seems to have played little role in Johnson's decisions and is barely mentioned in his memoirs. As the war escalated and America was drawn ever deeper into the quicksand, public opinion became more and more negative toward our Viet Nam activities, but by then Johnson could see no way out. His approval rating dropped from 70 percent in 1965 to 39 percent in August of 1967. Johnson was a very proud and sensitive man and this loss of popularity rankled. He commissioned private polls to prove that he was still popular, but on the basis of the polls as well as early primaries he decided not to seek reelection. He learned, as did subsequent presidents, that it is ultimately the success of a policy that determines a president's popularity and that you can't get repeat purchases of a product that people don't like.

It is important to distinguish between the use of polls to get elected and the use of polls to govern wisely. Since the Kennedy era, virtually every successful politician has used polls to develop election strategies. Let me again use Lyndon Johnson as an example, quoting from White's *The Making of the President—1964* (1965:257).

Johnson during campaigning had most of all wanted to know "How'm I doing?" and polls in his earlier career had been useful only as measures of personal impact. This attitude began to change slowly in the spring with the record of George Wallace in the northern primaries, for the president of the United States, so intent on passage of his Civil Rights Bill, could not but be concerned with the meaning of the surprising Wallace vote in the Democratic primary. He had read, like every political figure, the Gallup and the Harris polls, generally published. But he had read them as personality readings.

Now, in the spring, Walter Jenkins commissioned for the president a confidential poll on the Maryland primary—where Wallace had won 43 percent of the democratic vote—conducted by Oliver Quayle and Company. Out of it, Quayle had produced a 55-page technical report heavy with the terminology of the pollster: themes, voter profiles, issue measurements. Johnson read the poll overnight and was delighted; calling for more, he was supplied with Quayle polls on the Indiana and Wisconsin results which confirmed the original Maryland poll: that backlash was a potential threat, not yet a real threat. The studies fascinated Johnson with their contrasts of Republican and Democratic attitudes, with their measures of voter concern (number one: the frustration of Americans at the endless cold-war vexations) and approval (Johnson was doing a marvelous job on bread-and-butter issues). Backlash and the Negro revolt were indeed chipping away some Democratic strength in the big urban centers—but this was more than overmatched by a contrary drift of Republicans to Lyndon Johnson himself. By June, Johnson had become converted to polls, with the conversion of a man discovering a new science. From Maine, Quayle brought back a survey indicating that Johnson might pull as high as 77 percent of a vote held at the moment; and that Nixon voters of 1960, by a measure of roughly 50 percent, were willing to consider Johnson as their likely choice! From a survey of Wisconsin dairy farmers, traditionally Republican, came remarkable indication of Johnson strength.

But most of all Lyndon Johnson learned from the polls, which became his favorite reading material by June, that he was completely free to choose as vice-president any running mate he fancied. No name suggested in any Quayle poll as Johnson's partner added to or diminished the president's winning margin more than 2 percent. Theoretically free, as any president always is, to impose his own man as vice-president, he was politically free, too.

I do not believe that this use of polls in elections is in any sense an immoral or unethical practice, but neither do I see it as substantially advancing the skill and wisdom with which our leaders govern. A really serious concern arises when a president or any elected official is so concerned about what the polls are saying that he advocates or opposes programs on the basis of the polls, rather than attempting, as Roosevelt did, to lead the public in the direction he thinks is right. This use of the polls usually comes from presidents who cannot exert effective leadership.

Questions about the value of polls may have arisen because the elected presidents since Johnson have generally not used polls well. There are strong and unhappy similarities in the uses of polls by Presidents Nixon and Carter. Both were faced at some point with dropping popularity because of unpopular programs. Rather than using the polls as information about their programs, they concentrated on efforts to improve their images.

Here is how Roland Evans and Robert Novak (1971:388) describe President Nixon's reaction when his popularity dropped during the Laos operation in 1971:

Shortly after that Gallup finding, it was decided by Nixon's public relations experts to give the American people the largest concentrated dose of this president on television and in interviews with journalists. The purpose was to stimulate an immediate upward movement in the polls and thus prevent further deterioration of the president's position on Capitol Hill and in the nation.

In a period of six weeks, the president made seven major television appearances, but none of these had any impact on public opinion. As Evans and Novak report (p. 389): "All to no avail. The mid-March Gallup Poll . . . showed Nixon down to . . . still another new low. No matter how much propaganda poured out of the White House, Nixon could not prevent a nightmarish mass psychological reaction in the country."

The analogy between Nixon's use of opinion polling data in this crisis and Johnson's use of such data to evaluate his Vietnam policy is striking. The emphasis was on retaining or recovering presidential popularity rather than on making wise policy judgments.

One of the heaviest users of polls in recent times was Jimmy Carter. Unfortunately, he was not an effective president, nor did he use polls wisely. A graphic description of his use of polls is given by Elizabeth Drew (1979). In June 1979, the gasoline shortage which resulted in long waiting lines dropped Carter's approval rating to only 30 percent; by July, it had dropped to 25 percent. The president's pollster, Pat Caddell, first persuaded Mrs. Carter and then President Carter that the president was in terrible political trouble and that he needed to take bold, "breakthrough" actions.

The president was scheduled to make an energy speech at the beginning of July, but since there was no new energy policy, Caddell felt that it would be disastrous if the president simply made another energy speech and that he should address broader cultural issues. After reading a memorandum from Caddell and the draft of the energy speech, the president cancelled his speech.

Caddell also recommended that the president get tough with OPEC so that he could once more get the nation's attention. He recommended actions that would have both theatre and mystery since, he argued, these are important elements of leadership.

Carter and his advisors met at Camp David. As a consequence, the president asked for the resignation of his entire cabinet. The storm of protest that followed still further reduced Carter's ability to deal with Congress or lead the American public on energy issues. In retrospect, it is clear that Carter's use of polls was similar to Nixon's and almost the direct opposite of their use by Roosevelt. It is also obvious that a slavish use of polls can never make up for lack of leadership.

It is too early to judge the present Reagan administration. It got off to a spectacular start, at least in part because of a highly effective use of polls, as reported in an article by Sidney Blumenthal (1981:43):

Ronald Reagan . . . is applying in the White House the techniques he employed in getting there. Making more effective use of media and market research than any previous president, he has brought into the White House the most sophisticated team of pollsters, media masters and tacticians ever to work there. They have helped him to transcend entrenched institutions like the Congress and the Washington press corps to appeal directly to the people.

This does not mean that the president goes by the polls rather than by his own conservative ideology. The polls don't change his beliefs or shape his policies; they tell him how to plan his strategies.

As a specific example, when the polls showed strong opposition to U.S. policy in El Salvador, Reagan quickly pulled back from highlighting the topic because it would drain support from his economic programs. Reagan's tactics were highly successful in obtaining approval for the first-year budget and tax cuts.

So far, this description of President Reagan's use sounds very much like Roosevelt's, and if continued would be wise and effective. Unfortunately, as a president's popularity falls because a program is not working well, there is a tendency to search for an easy solution. In the spring of 1982, a prolonged economic slump caused a sharp drop in presidential popularity, and some recent behavior by Reagan is distressingly similar to that of Carter. As reported in *Newsweek*:

When Ronald Reagan's advisors gathered at Camp David earlier this year to review his latest polls, they discovered that he was slumping badly with Roman Catholics. Last week they came up with what they hoped might be a quick fix. The president flew to Chicago, home of the country's largest Catholic school system, and announced his intention to give tuition tax credits to families that send their children to nonpublic schools. Congress, however, is almost certain to turn a deaf ear, at least for this year. At a time when federal aid to public education is falling and when the projected federal deficit is about \$100 billion, not many legislators are in the mood for more tax relief of any kind (Williams et al., 1982:86).

The use of polls does not depend on political party affiliation. Since Roosevelt, most presidents, regardless of party and of location on a liberal-conservative spectrum, have used polls to govern and, since Kennedy, to be elected. The use of polls is no assurance, however, that a president will govern well.

Let me briefly summarize the points I have been making, so that you can use them if you are ever asked to defend opinion research while standing on one foot:

1. No elected official can govern wisely without knowing what the public thinks on major issues. Public opinion research is one source, but not the only source, of such information.

2. The use of opinion information does not insure that wise decisions will be made; that depends on the wisdom and political leadership of our elected officials and our wisdom in selecting them.

3. Using opinion polls as measures of presidential popularity and then shaping presidential behavior and policies to increase the president's popularity is treating the symptoms and not the cause. Popularity results from the public perception that the policies being proposed are sensible and will be well implemented. To repeat, I do not believe that one can use polls or surveys to get repeat buying for a bad product—be it a cereal or a presidential policy.

Finally, skill in using the polls to get elected does not insure wisdom in office. A mindless use of public opinion polls to retain political power while in office usually leads to weak, ineffective governing. Fortunately, most politicians who follow this strategy do not get reelected.

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