

# PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

## POLLING AS POLITICAL SCIENCE AND POLLING AS JOURNALISM

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PHILIP MEYER

The mass media and the survey research profession share many attitudes and beliefs about what they do and their contributions to a functioning democracy. There are, however, some cultural differences that create a source of conflict. Our work is based more in science, theirs more in art, although each is, of course, a blend of the two. As one who has worked in both fields, I shall offer some notes, and perhaps the beginnings of a theoretical perspective, on some of the sources of conflict.

Several years ago, a popular young instructor at my university was denied tenure by the department of political science. His publications, the department chair explained, were more like journalism than political science. We in the school of journalism tried not to take that personally. But I understood the dilemma. In my newspaper career I was often accused of writing stuff that was more like political science than journalism. One case stands out in my memory with particular clarity.

Jimmy Carter was challenging President Jerry Ford for the presidency in 1976, and the pundits were writing about Carter's religiosity and how it was tapping a conservative strain in the electorate and helping his cause. Then one of the major polls published a simple crosstab: it showed that Carter did neither better nor worse among people with strong religious feeling. After that the punditry focused on the failure of Carter's religiosity to sway the voters.

That happened to be the one presidential election year when Knight-Ridder Newspapers had its own national poll, and I saw a chance to challenge the pundits. Remembering Morris Rosenberg's elegant work on *The Logic of Survey Analysis*, I checked to see if age was working as a suppressor variable here. Carter had a strong appeal for young people, but the young are less religious. Sure enough, those young, non-churchgoing Carter fans were masking the religion effect. When age was held constant, religion effect appeared. Revealing it took nothing more complicated than a three-way table.

Have you ever seen a three-way table described in a newspaper story? It is not a pretty sight.

I wrote the story and some of the Knight-Ridder papers even ran it, amid some grumbling that observations such as this were more appropriate to an academic journal. The finding was not widely disseminated, however, and it never did reach those secret centers where conventional wisdom is manufactured and packaged, and the main pundits never went back to discussing the religiosity effect in that campaign. I tried not to take it personally.

Despite that misadventure, I believe that journalism needs a stronger basis in scientific method and that pollsters who work for the media should stay close to their scientific roots.

In journalism schools, the concept of precision journalism—the application of social and behavioral science research methods to the practice of journalism—found a ready market. The acceptance of this concept was due, in part, to its contribution to the healing of the breach between the trade school faction (the green eyeshades) and the mass communication researchers (the chi-squares). It produced work that both the researchers and the craft people could appreciate. The tools of sampling, computer analysis, and statistical inference increased the traditional power of the reporter without changing the nature of the mission—to find the facts, understand them, and explain them without wasting time.

In the profession, however, the barriers have been greater. Precision journalism conflicts with several important journalistic traditions. Simplicity is the most obvious. Others are journalistic passivity and journalistic innocence. The passive tradition holds that media should report news, not make news. Media involvement in public opinion polling has been criticized on the ground that the media should not do polls, but wait passively until other people do them and then report on them. This criticism has come both from some working journalists (Von Hoffman, 1980) and some members of the polling fraternity—though perhaps not from a representative sample of either.

The ethic of innocence is related to the passivity constraint. It holds that a reporter should be a person who casts a fresh eye on everything, something that he or she cannot do if burdened by too much specialized knowledge. The extreme case is a foreign correspondent who rationalizes his or her failure to learn the language of the country to which he or she is assigned. Readers do not know the language, and the reporter's job is merely to observe what readers would observe if they were there. If reporters learned a foreign language, they might start to think like foreigners and lose touch with those readers.

The trouble with being a passive and innocent journalist is that, like any passive and innocent person, one can be too easily taken advan-

tage of. The underlying theme in most modern criticism of journalism is that the media are too easily dominated by powerful politicians and their spin doctors whose desires determine what is defined as news and what is not. To defend against being manipulated, the media need more self-confidence, and the best route to self-confidence is through knowledge and technical skill. Media polls proliferated in the 1980s precisely because editors no longer trusted the polls that politicians tried to give them. They armed themselves with their own data collection operations out of self-defense. Thus, polling became not so much a way to make news as an enhanced tool of the news gathering process itself. Polling became an extension of journalism by other means.

Now it is true, as many critics say, that election polling has been overemphasized. Precision journalism is at its best when it is sorting out the conflicts among special interest groups, measuring their support, estimating their potential for having an effect. When it does this, it departs from the referendum model of public opinion whose main virtue is that it is easy to understand. Current journalistic practice tends to overgeneralize the referendum model. Howard Schuman (1986), speaking from this podium four years ago, gave us some good methodological reasons for avoiding the referendum model. Now I am going to offer a substantive one.

To lay the groundwork, let me tell you about a shockingly inadequate polling methodology that is currently being used to decide some of the most important public policy issues of our day. This method involves self-selected respondents, a response rate that is usually less than 50%, and it uses simple binary response categories to represent complex aggregations of political attitudes. Moreover, the respondent burden is so heavy that the self-selected respondent actually has to leave his or her home and pay significant costs in time and travel to participate. I refer of course, to our election system. In its design and operation, it is much like a 1-900 poll.

My point is that no policy decision in this country is ever made by a representative sample of adults in which each person's vote counts exactly the same.

Why, then, do we go to so much trouble to acquire and interview a representative sample of the public? Because, like Mt. Everest, it is there? Perhaps. And because we are intuitively comfortable with the fairness of the referendum, majority-decides model. Early in his career, George Gallup (1972) started promoting the habit of thinking of a poll as a continuous referendum by which majority will could be made known. His media clients fell into that habit, and media polls have followed it ever since.

But observers of politics since Alexis de Tocqueville and James Madison have known that the referendum model is much too simple for

the complexities of representative government in a large and conflict-ridden society. The majority wants conflicting things. The composition of the majority shifts from one issue to the next. Some voters feel so strongly about a single issue that they will yield on almost everything else to get their way on that one issue. Such logrolling takes place quite visibly among elected representatives, but you can see its origins in the work of single-issue pressure groups. Like most modern democracies, we are governed by temporary coalitions. The process of forming those coalitions, always less formal and more difficult to follow than in European parliamentary democracies, is worth following, but it demands something better than the referendum model, including a recognition that not all opinions are equal.

As originally conceived during the social protest movements of the 1960s, precision journalism was a way to expand the tool kit of the reporter to gain access to topics that were previously inaccessible, or only crudely accessible. It was especially useful in giving a hearing to minority and dissident groups that were struggling for representation.

Precision journalism is at its best when it follows the struggles of the dissidents clamoring for our attention and follows the progress of the successful groups into the mainstream. And the obsession with elections diverts energy from that purpose. Nevertheless, I do not resent all the resources that are devoted to election polls because of two redeeming features. One is that they help maintain interest in an election at a time in our history when maintaining the public's attention is increasingly difficult. Politics has always had a necessary entertainment function. We should not feel guilty about our participation in that aspect. The second is that election polls are among the very few whose accuracy can be quickly and decisively tested, and for that reason they tend to keep us honest.

People who vote are an interesting and deviant subset of the general population. Except in national elections, they are usually a minority. Measuring their attitudes and behavior is especially relevant and especially challenging. And when the measurement tools are good enough to predict how people will vote—even when the potential voters are not sure themselves—the validity of polls is confirmed.

Ironically, it is the fact that this stern test of validity is passed so often that leads journalists to question their values when they adopt polling as a journalistic tool. The more accurate the polls, the more voters are likely to take them into account in choosing their behaviors—whether in tactical voting or in the decision whether to vote at all. Polling, therefore, threatens the traditional journalistic values of innocence and passivity—so much so that some media are engaging in voluntary self-regulation to mute the effects of the new tools.

The voluntary withholding of exit-poll information by the networks

until the voting is finished in the state in which the poll was taken is not so surprising. Broadcasters are used to dealing with regulation. But for print media to experiment with self-regulation is surprising. As early as the 1976 presidential election, the *New York Times* imposed on itself a ban on horse-race standings in its polls. It told us everything about support for Jimmy Carter and Jerry Ford—except who was ahead. Their relative support in various subgroups of the electorate was reported, and, if you had a copy of the World Almanac and the back of an old envelope on which to do a few hand calculations, you could derive the horse-race standings, but the *Times* would not give them to you directly.

Why journalists should feel so guilty about their obsessive concern with who is ahead is hard to fathom. The most interesting fact about an election is who wins. The most interesting thing about a campaign at any given moment is who is ahead. Yes, of course you want to know about the dynamics of the campaign and what put the front-runner where he or she is. Bill Kovach (1990) put it well when he said that the media should provide context by telling us on what information or absence of information opinions are based. But none of that interesting and useful information is going to make much sense unless you can identify the front-runner.

The other advantage of focusing on the horse race, as we like to call it, is that rare chance it gives us to check on a poll's validity. By using our techniques of sampling and measurement, we can isolate those deviants who actually vote, determine their likely choices, and even allocate the undecided. If you can find out, ahead of time, who is going to win, that is news by definition. The *Literary Digest* demonstrated the news value of election predictions starting in 1916. At just the moment that its technology failed, George Gallup and his peers demonstrated that it could be perfected. Gallup, some of you will recall, performed a polling hat trick. Not only did he predict that Franklin Roosevelt would win the 1936 election in a landslide, he also predicted that the *Literary Digest* poll would show the opposite. He even had an accurate estimate of the percentage that the *Digest* poll would give Alf Landon. (He did it by checking a small sample from the same lists of telephone and automobile users that the *Digest* used to recruit its two million respondents). That established Gallup's reputation and made polling credible. It is the ability of the polls to predict the outcome of elections that gives us our continued credibility today. For journalists to deny that their polls are predictions is futile. Since the advent of those quasi-scientific polls of the 1930s, the technology has improved to the point where a national poll is considered a failure if it misses the election outcome by more than two percentage points. In 1988, six national polls were in the field close enough to election time so that

their results could be considered predictions. All met the two-point test. Four of the six were off by only one point. That should be a source of pride for journalistic polls, and they should welcome the test. In doing so, they move journalism closer to science because one of the characteristics of science is that it states its propositions in forms that can be tested.

To state them vaguely, so that whatever happens the findings can be reinterpreted to fit the outcome, is more like fortune telling than science. And yet journalists, in the process of absorbing polling into their own subculture, are uncomfortable with this test, and they are threatening to undo a half-century of polling tradition.

When there were basically only two national election polls, those of Gallup and Harris, the media did not mind presenting their final tallies as predictions. Both Gallup and Harris facilitated the comparison by producing results that could be directly compared to the election outcome. They did this by presenting the final result in a two-candidate election as two numbers that added up to 100—just as the percentages in the election would. The undecided segment was folded into the total with a leaning question (“As of today, which way do you lean?”) and the hard core of undecided, nonleaning respondents was allocated by various means that were refined over the years.

A moment ago, I said that all six national election polls in 1988 had predictions within two percentage points. That is not strictly true because three of the six did not take the final step of allocating the undecided. To evaluate them, to look at their results as predictions, I had to do what Irv Crespi did in his latest book, and make the allocation myself through the simple expedient of backing the undecided out of the percentage base. These were the polls of the three broadcast networks and their respective print affiliates. George Bush won with 54% of the two-party vote, and when you repercentage the poll findings on that basis, CBS gave him 55%, ABC 55%, and NBC 53%.

The fact that news media are not willing to put themselves to the same test that Gallup and Harris have been accepting all these years is cause for worry. And it is getting worse.

Now here I have to pause and explain something. I am about to attack the *New York Times*. I do this out of love and respect and because the *Times* rests at the top of a Guttman scale where it does almost all things better than any other newspaper. If the *Times* does something right, you can be quite certain that only some of the papers below it on the scale will also do it. If it does something wrong, all of the papers below it are likely to do the same thing. The most efficient way to improve the standards of journalism, therefore, is to attack the *New York Times*.

The *Times* failed to allocate the undecided in the poll that it shared

with CBS, but its sin of omission did not end there. It also emasculated the Gallup Poll. When the *Times* reported the final Gallup poll result in November, 1988, it deleted the Gallup Organization's basic prediction of a Bush win with 56% of the two-party vote and reported only the less refined numbers, suppressing Gallup's allocation of the undecided portion (*New York Times*, 1988). The Gallup Organization put its reputation to the test, as it has in every presidential election year since 1936, and the *Times* did not believe that its readers in 1988 were up to handling that knowledge.

The only national newspaper with a preelection poll presented as a straightforward prediction with the two candidate percentages summing to 100 was *USA Today*. And that almost didn't happen. Gordon Black's findings of 55% for Bush and 45% for Dukakis were presented in a vivid page-one graphic display, but those two numbers were not mentioned in the accompanying story (*USA Today*, 1988). There was disagreement among the editors of *USA Today* on which course to pursue. And the editors who opposed publishing a report that could be used as a prediction finally got the upper hand. But by then, the graphic had already been completed and dummied into the page. It could only be changed with much delay and expense. So Black's good numbers were the most prominent decoration for a story that, in its final form, put the main emphasis on the uncertain nature of the undecided.

It gets worse. Some newspaper editors—whose products stand below the *Times* on the Guttman scale and who look to the *Times* for guidance—have even become wary of incorporating leaners into their final figures. Others go even farther by barring their pollsters from working close to election day, whistling them off the field early enough so that the poll cannot be construed as a prediction. It is as though prediction becomes more difficult as the election gets nearer—quite the reverse of the reality.

What explains this intellectual self-mutilating behavior on the part of journalists?

One explanation of this bizarre behavior is that the media want to avoid the obvious validity test and leave the leaners and undecided voters positioned as a cover for their polls' possible mistakes. (If their poll is off by 10 points and there were 10% undecided, they have all the possibilities covered.) There may be some truth to that. When journalists are uneasy, they take refuge in vagueness. But I prefer a more subtle explanation: the complaints against polls have made the media managers feel guilty about their own precision, and so they seek to conceal that precision.

This guilt is based on the perceived violation of the journalistic norms of innocence and passivity: the genuine belief that the media should observe and report with detachment and not participate. Pub-

lishing polls may seem too dangerously close to participation. This stance bespeaks a certain ignorance of how democracy works in the United States. Every decision on what to print and what not to print is, after all, a form of participation. Yes, poll findings do effect the outcome of elections, but so do data about any aspect of the campaign. The only thing different about polling data is that they are more likely to be accurate than data based on rumor, speculation, and the musings of the spin doctors. Nowhere did Montesquieu or John Locke or Thomas Jefferson say that democracy should be conducted in a sterile, information-free environment. Democratic theory holds quite the opposite. Information helps the voters, and they can be trusted to use it wisely. They really can. There is another journalistic tradition, older and stronger than the traditions of passivity and innocence, that holds that information's healing light always helps the system. I expect that tradition to prevail in the long run.

And we should help it to prevail. We should look with suspicion at any kind of media self-regulation that restricts the flow of information. The cure is more information, not less, and by keeping track of the polls' successes and failures at predicting elections, we can help the information marketplace sort the good from the bad. For all of my politically aware life, the de facto standard for information about public opinion polls has been set by the Gallup Poll. Six years ago, when our school of journalism poll of North Carolina showed that Jesse Helms would win reelection, I was challenged in print by the *Raleigh News & Observer* for presuming to allocate the undecided. Two days later, that newspaper ran its own privately commissioned Gallup Poll with the undecided allocated, and I felt vindicated. Editors were quite willing to accept the Gallup reporting format as the standard. Now that the Gallup Organization is under new ownership and new management, a number of people have been wondering publicly whether the owners of the name will attempt to preserve its traditions. It will be some time before we know. I don't know how many of you noticed this, but the old Gallup Organization broke its own tradition four years ago when, for the first time since 1938, it failed to attempt to predict the national Republican-Democrat distribution in the congressional elections. Those congressional predictions were an important part of the Gallup accuracy record: a mean absolute error of 2.2% across 26 elections since 1936 and a mean absolute error of only 1.5% in 19 elections since 1950. It appears that we shall have to wait until November, 1992, to see how well the Gallup record is maintained.

However, I do not believe that we should attach too much importance to what the present owners of the Gallup name decide to do. The tradition that Dr. Gallup established belongs not just to the new owners, nor even to the Gallup family nor the former employees. It belongs



to all of us. Everyone who is involved in media polling should accept the discipline of external validation that an election provides and present results in a format that the public can easily compare to the election outcome. Our technology justifies it and our tradition demands it.

The old standards of journalism are under special strain as we move more fully into the information age. I happen to believe that a more scientific approach will be journalism's salvation. We can help—but only if we insist on keeping our own standards high.

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