

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

NOISE AND CLAMOR: THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SUCCESS

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Recently I visited an erstwhile sociologist who has seen the light and left academia. I told him about my presidential address, and he reminded me that these speeches usually come in one of three flavors. The first is vanilla: "Let's Have Better Theory and Better Research." The second is chocolate, the one called "Public Opinion in the Year 2000." The third is one of those Ben and Jerry extravaganzas, full of charts and typographies, often signifying very little. That flavor speech is usually titled "Toward a New Public Opinion." I have no charts or graphics and this speech, I hope, isn't any of those flavors. Instead, it is a realistic assessment of what can happen when one's great expectations come true—and what the price of that success can be.

George Gallup, in 1940, wrote about the public's "honesty and common sense." He admired what he called the "grasp of broad principles which voters of all types possess, and their capacity to adjust themselves to the ever-changing movement of events." Unlike George Gallup, politicians express that same confidence in the public only when it suits them. Even cartoon politicians. Opus, the penguin in Bloom County, professes his "faith in the intelligence and common horse sense of the noble masses." But after he discovers the masses have rejected his attempt at image changing, the "masses" are no longer noble. He calls them "stupid," and instead of having "horse sense," they are "horse-brained!"

However, George Gallup would have been pleased with the way voters approached the last presidential campaign. They took more control of the political process through increased turnout and a revival of other kinds of participation. Voters called 800 numbers to contribute money, to request a candidate's platform, and to become "volunteers." Candidates reached out to them through television talk shows and call-in programs. The media responded with new ways of covering campaigns. The *Charlotte Observer* avoided the horse race, but surveyed its market to discover what issues mattered, while television networks tried to sample public opinion through tracking polls, mea-

tures of immediate reaction, call-ins, and even unscientific alternative forms of audience involvement.

It was quite a year. But so is *this* year. It's a year when AAPOR looks back, as its history—long in the writing—is at last published. This organization, which was founded in the post-World War II euphoria, is experiencing a generational upheaval just as our nation and our government are. AAPOR's newly elected executive council—15 members—has only two who were in school at the time of the 1946 Central City conference, the conference that eventually led to the formation of AAPOR. Eleven of the 15 had not yet been born. Our institution's history exists now on paper, and not in the memories of its current leaders. So this is a good time to look back—and we must—to compare the problems public opinion research faced in 1946 with those we face today.

Before 1948, there was an expectation of polling growth, nationally and internationally. Julien Woodward, at that 1946 Central City Conference on Public Opinion, said that growth posed dangers: the manipulation of polling agencies to serve private ends and the potential for polls to be used as a club over public servants. What he thought officials would hear from their advisors was, "This is what the public thinks. You must vote accordingly." Woodward worried that pollsters might lock themselves and their polls into then-current techniques, because new ones might cost more, and that cutthroat competition among private polls would drive down polls' quality.

Today, Woodward might find his fears realized. Survey measurements are not just evaluations of actions taken. They are, in fact, used as prescriptions for action. The news media remind decision makers whenever their approval ratings change; they remind them that certain actions are unpopular and that the public will reject both the actions and the decision makers. Candidates use focus groups to form campaign strategies and select among options. The Roper Center, the polling report, and the political hotline give us a kind of "poll equality": we know what everyone's findings are, and every poll appears equal to every other, regardless of whether it's done well, poorly, or indifferently.

This is not good. But Woodward also called polling a "public utility," operating in the public interest. So, he said, "polls must conduct themselves in such a way as to *justify* the responsibilities that will be theirs and to deserve the respect with which the public will regard them." What he found good about the polls he said later. He said that polls are "an adjunct to the ballot box, designed to make government more responsible to the electorate, and consequently, more democratic. . . . The ballot box is inadequate," he said. "The poll is the continuing ballot box."

Well, today, we *have* that continuing ballot box. And as a result, the relationship between the people and their government has changed. We've changed, too. But the changes may have resulted in some of the bad ends that Woodward expected and not in the good ends he expected. Not by any means.

Technological changes *have* affected our views of polls and public opinion. The new information age can be a time of confusion. When the University of Michigan measures of consumer confidence *become* consumer confidence; when an approval rating (*any* approval rating) *becomes* how the president is doing, we have changed reality. To much of America, our research *is* the reality. We are no longer simply measuring it.

The public's first view of a news event is often the reaction to it. My sociologist friend lives in California, and by midafternoon there, the lead of radio and television news stories is no longer the action the president has proposed but how the opposition has reacted to it. While I was in California, I read an afternoon paper whose final edition comes out *after* the first feeds of network evening news broadcasts are over. The reaction to events quickly overtakes the events themselves.

And so it has been with public opinion. It too overtakes events. When it is confused with reality, it can trivialize our view of the public's ability to think, and reason, and to react to events. It makes us question the good judgment of the public whose views we measure.

The American public *has* become more cynical about government since the pioneering days of George Gallup and the other AAPOR founders—or at least, they have become more willing to express that cynicism. Certainly people have more information available to them—and regional differences seem to have faded.

But what is genuinely different now, compared to the postwar years, is that nowadays the public gets so much of its politics already interpreted for it. In the past 4 months, beltway pundits have described no fewer than *three* Clinton presidencies. But their interpretations are often based on polls that often are not all that different from one another, and they certainly haven't been unidirectional. Polls taken at 2-week intervals in the past few months (admittedly, by different organizations) found the following shifts in Bill Clinton's approval rating: from 58 percent to 53 percent to 59 percent to 53 percent to 57 percent to 49 percent to 57 percent to 45 percent. Trend? Yes, but different trends at different times. This is information, but how informative is it? It's almost like what Truman Capote once remarked about Jack Kerouac's novel, *On The Road*: "That isn't writing—it's typing." Continuing ballot boxes shouldn't bounce around so much.

Media analysts—fortunately or unfortunately—love to extend any movement or trend linearly. Their doing that after the 1984 Michigan

Democratic caucuses gave us the potential nomination of Jesse Jackson. After Iowa in 1988, we foresaw the end of the Bush campaign. And last spring, there was the Jerry Brown steamroller. If we believed all the analysis about polls that came out in 1992, Bill Clinton died and was reborn at least four times—once in New Hampshire, once in Connecticut, once in early June (killed by voter dissatisfaction and Ross Perot), and once in the last week of the campaign.

Of course, there are times when data define a trend. But in the past (and especially in the postwar founding of AAPOR), those data took longer to accumulate. The *length* of the data collection time added to the importance of each measurement. When AAPOR was founded, our ability to take the measurements we wanted was far more restricted and limited than it is now, and our theories of how politics and public opinion change were based on studies conducted far less frequently than are our polls today. And our theories still are, even though today we measure differently and more frequently. Our present understanding of electoral behavior continues to rely heavily on Center for Political Studies research, surveys conducted once every 2 years, during presidential and congressional campaigns. Our evaluations of changes in attitudes about civil liberties, race, and religious beliefs still come from the General Social Survey, taken once a year, in the spring. Even the Gallup Poll, the source of the measures of presidential approval that formed the bases for John Mueller's seminal work, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, was based on polls conducted days, if not weeks, after the key events that could spark an uptick in presidential support.

The Founding Fathers believed that any problem of having "too much" democracy in the United States could be overcome by a corresponding increase in the size of the country and in its voting public. But technology has made our once-large republic small indeed.

We live now in a time when instantaneous response is not only possible but expected. Our profession is used (and sometimes abused) by pundits who will use us and our findings when they find it convenient, but will happily substitute some other measures (even phone calls or letters) to express their own opinions as if they were fact. That's not new, though it may be more intense now. George Gallup worried about the confusion a legislator might feel, unable to distinguish real public opinion from what Gallup called the "noise and clamor" of propaganda experts who know how to build a private interest into a demonstration.

These days, measurements are obtained so quickly that they are virtually immediate. Instead of days and weeks, we talk about hours and sometimes even minutes. Results from the CBS News reaction poll after the second presidential debate in 1992 were broadcast less

than 15 minutes after the debate ended. What we in the media now call “long-term” reaction is what we measure 48 hours after an event. And sometimes the difference is enormous. Remember—it took pollsters more than 2 days to get their surveys into the field 40 years ago.

The speed with which newsworthy polling can be done—both field work and analysis—is a function of the same technological advances that created the speeded-up news cycle. And that makes me wonder if we’ve lost the thoughtfulness that was forced on us in the past. Technological advances mean we no longer need to structure a questionnaire far enough in advance to ensure it will reach the interviewer in time to conduct field work, send the questionnaires back, and input and analyze the answers. If one day’s questions are poorly constructed or miss the point, there is always the next day’s survey to correct the error. Immediate response is more important than what the response is or what it really means. In other words, we may no longer have to think.

In 1992, and in this first year after the election, our poll measurements have been so frequent and have received so much attention that they *are* accepted as reality—not only by political actors but by many journalists who interpret polls for the public, and by many academics who interpret them for the next generation. When what we consider reputable polls—our continuing ballot box—show a politician’s support changing from day to day or a president’s approval rating moving up and down from week to week, we have to ask ourselves if we are measuring reality or creating it. Even beyond issues of response rate and data quality, by the very *frequency* of our polling, are we stating new assumptions about the American public? Are we unintentionally formulating new theories of public opinion? And if we are, what about those theories that we developed in our profession’s earlier days?

I believe that, in part, we *are* working from new assumptions. Frequent polling, and our easy access to it, *assumes* a malleable public and *implies* a public that could be irrational and unreasoning, a public without core values. Otherwise, it seems there would be no reason to invest time and energy in collecting, reporting, and analyzing small changes in public opinion or investing them with detailed meaning. And according to the paradigm of the continuing ballot box, which we seem to have internalized, the public is not only malleable but extraordinarily attentive and reactive to the minutiae of politics. Their opinions change frequently and in direct response to news events and new information. In other words, we may be seeing the public as the McLaughlin Group.

Even when we make perfectly reasonable decisions about who should be polled in the immediate preelection period, those decisions inadvertently reinforce the notion of a malleable public. When we

change methods, bases, and descriptors—when we move back and forth between all adults, registered voters and likely voters—we compound the problem and confuse people. The journalists and the public are the ones who make the mistake, but it really is *our* fault.

Americans *aren't* stupid. The last election's turnout shows that many Americans are attentive to politics, although their definition of attentiveness is probably quite different from that of Beltway insiders. Last year, Americans expressed real interest in campaign events, in issues, and in candidates' positions. For example, at the end of the 1988 presidential campaign, only 38 percent of registered voters reported paying a lot of attention to that campaign. As early as July of 1992, 45 percent of registered voters said they were paying a lot of attention. And, by November, two out of three were paying a lot of attention.

That surprised us. In fact, very little of that was predicted either by polls or by analysts in the spring. Even in midyear, polls were interpreted as suggesting that voter dissatisfaction with the two parties' choices would depress turnout or actually elect Ross Perot. It shouldn't have. If we had not been so caught up in the details of poll results, and if we had been less willing to believe that what is true today will be true tomorrow, we might not have been so stunned, and sometimes so embarrassed.

While the continuing ballot box has brought unintended consequences, there is another expectation from the early days of AAPOR that has its analogue today. Participants at the very first session at the Central City conference spoke about the hopes of collecting and reporting *world* opinion. In the postwar era, Americans brought public opinion polls to Japan, along with real democracy, and an opportunity for public participation in public affairs. And polls caught on.

Today, democracy and polling are starting to take root in Russia and in the rest of the former Soviet bloc. I went to Moscow to cover the April 25 referendum on the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Democracy, and fledgling capitalism, has created a kind of polling democracy there. The very *act* of trying to do one exit poll in Russia begot competition. *Three* exit polls were conducted there, and two of the three were attempted solely because the American television network pool introduced the idea to two firms, as it searched for the group that would conduct the one it wanted. The tripling of Russian exit polls and the competition among them shows how exciting the prospect of gathering information quickly can be, and how much people *really* want to do it, how much people really want to know.

And the operational difficulty of conducting polls in Russia makes each poll more valuable as an adjunct to the democratic process. In the network's Russian exit poll, one interviewer was arrested, two

others were harassed. In one city, the local authorities declared there would be “No sociological surveys” there. In the United States, by comparison, the worst that usually happens to an interviewer is a hang-up. That’s normal, yet many analysts—many of us—never experience even *that*.

We fear that too many polls drive response rates down. But frequent polls have yet another—final—consequence. It’s so easy to conduct polls now that it may actually *cheapen* the value of each one we do. Instead of meaning, we may just be getting noise—noise and clamor.

For better or worse, today we live in a world of the continuing ballot box, and *we* are the election officials. We have achieved the ability to cut through the noise and clamor of unscientific measures, even as we risk making some noise and clamor of our own. We have moved forward, just as the Central City conference expected we would. And we will make more changes, construct new measurements, and adopt new techniques. Some of them will be controversial and all of them will produce unintended consequences. But going backwards is not an option.

So we must be aware of the trade-offs. Defense Lawyer Henry Drummond, defending evolution in the play *Inherit the Wind*, put it best. “Progress has never been a bargain. You’ve got to pay for it. You may conquer the air, but the birds will lose their wonder, and the clouds will smell of gasoline.”