

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

OPINION POLLS AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS: 1945/1995

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I am honored to speak to this conference as AAPOR celebrates its fiftieth birthday.

I have spent my entire professional life designing, conducting, and reporting attitude surveys. I had the pleasure of working with two of the three acknowledged founding fathers of public opinion polling, George Gallup and Archibald Crossley. But more important, I had the good fortune of being trained by the much less acknowledged Paul Perry. Perry, who devised the Gallup Organization's election methodology, was chiefly responsible for its remarkable polling record between 1950 and 1980. A record that helped restore credibility to all opinion polls, post-1948.

I think it is fair to say that I can trace my research roots in opinion research back to the early days of opinion polling, and the early days of AAPOR.

I like what I do, and I believe that as researchers, we make an important contribution to a democratic society. But increasingly, many outside our profession either have begun to doubt this or flatly disagree that America is a better place because of opinion research. The new criticisms of polls differ from the criticisms that I heard when I first started coming to AAPOR. They are not about our methods, or our accuracy as they once were, but are now about our impact upon the democratic process.

The founders of the survey research profession felt strongly that American democracy benefited from what they did, and they articulated it just as simply as that. We don't. We are not nearly as much advocates of polling as was the first generation of survey researchers. And that is troubling because our critics are growing in number and our professional image has been transformed.

I don't think we have the Rodney Dangerfield problem. Polls get plenty of respect. But they get very little affection. Polls get respect

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because their results are a source of power, particularly in Washington, where I work. But they are not well liked for a variety of reasons, depending on the perspective of the critic. All of us have our own examples and anecdotes about the way pollsters are portrayed in the popular culture—either as manipulators themselves or as advisers to weak officials. And, during an election period, talk to civic groups, or just plain folks, about polling and feel the vibes. They are not very good. When I first started giving such talks people would ask how we do it; now they ask why we do it.

As I see it, the people, the press, and the policymakers all voice different, but in many ways interrelated, concerns about the polls.

The People

The public thinks that polls are used by politicians and campaigners to manipulate the electorate. Added to what I call frustrations with forecasting, the public now also faults polling as an integral part of the new politics of sound bites, negative campaigning, media blitzes, and so on. Writing recently in the *New York Times*, Michael Wines (1995) described the public as regarding pollsters as “puppet-masters, dictating policy by telling Presidents and Congressmen what will and what won’t win votes.” He added that pollsters are “the sorcerers of modern politics” and quoted Bill Schneider describing pollsters as having the “reputation of Svengalis,” because in his words the “pollster is supposed to have some mystic communion with the American electorate.”

Clearly, the antagonism toward pollsters is part and parcel of a larger discontent with politics and governance. The prominence of partisan polling in campaigning these days plays no small part in this. Many of the most negative aspects of our public image emanate from the role that partisan pollsters play. While they employ the survey method and rely on data to come to their conclusions, their highest priorities are getting their clients elected and keeping them in office. The acuity of their recommendations is more important than the accuracy of their data. Many do solid survey work. In my opinion, many more do mediocre to poor survey work, but their skill as consultants compensates for these shortcomings. They have been doing it the wrong way for so long, many of them don’t know what they don’t know.

The media practice of bipartisan pairing of pollsters only detracts from the public image of pollsters. Even when they are discussing well-conducted surveys, two are required to offset the biases of one. Listening to them spin and spar, rather than illuminate, can only leave the public with more doubts about the survey enterprise.

The Press

I don't mean to single out partisan polling as the cause of all of our problems. Many in the press and elsewhere are critical of the way published polls have changed campaign coverage. Horse-race journalism is what every serious news organization does not want to practice. The impact of fund-raising on a candidate's standing in published polls and polls as news making, rather than as news reporting, are the frequent complaints about the published polls. Alfred Cantril (1991) does a good job of covering such criticisms in his book *The Opinion Connection*.

The Policymakers

In recent years concerns about the impact of public opinion polling on governance have increased markedly. Criticisms of the Clinton administration for its reliance on opinion polling and a campaign approach within the White House are in part responsible. There is no shortage of columns and editorials that make the point that true leaders are not poll driven. A large element of this has to do with the highly visible role that Stan Greenberg and now new pollsters play in the affairs of the Clinton administration. In *On the Edge*, Elizabeth Drew (1994) writes, "Previous Presidents had pollsters and other outside political advisers, but never before had they played such an integral part in a Presidency. . . . The amount of weight given in presidential decision making to polling results can have a defining effect on a Presidency" (pp. 124–25).

Indeed, but the reverse is true as well. The way a president uses polls can affect, and in this case is affecting, the way polls are thought of. Having looked at recent critiques and other major quarrels with polling over the past decade, I catalog their themes as follows.

1. *Public opinion polls subvert leadership—the familiar refrain that surveys convert leaders into followers.* A good recent example is Robin Gerber (1994) writing in the *Washington Post* that "polls corrupt the leader's instinct to govern from the guts." She quotes Congressman Steny Hoyer saying, "Surveys confuse leaders. . . . We are not trying to figure out what's right but what is the passion of the day." In the area of foreign policy, analysts cite the marriage of polling and real-time television reporting as a one-two punch that holds leaders hostage to instant referendums on decisions about international events that people watch on CNN.

2. *Polls create a climate of opinion and are used to manipulate the public.* In a *Harper's* piece that attracted a lot of attention, Christopher

Hitchens (1992, p. 49) describes polling as “a malignancy that its early critics could not have imagined.” He sees surveys as “borne out of a struggle not to discover public opinion, but to master it.” From his left-wing perspective he writes that “the polling industry is a powerful ally of depoliticalization, and its counterpart, which is consensus.” He adds that, while polls help decide what people think, “their most important long-term influence may be on *how* people think.”

A decade earlier, from the Right, Irving Kristol (1983) had written a slightly more measured but similar critique. He saw a conspiracy between the establishment media and polls to create a liberal consensus, complaining that the polls were keeping the Reagan administration from doing the right thing in Central America. Ironically, Hitchens also uses Central America, but as an example of how public opinion polls are sometimes consciously downplayed when their results don't fit a policy objective.

3. *Polls promote majoritism.* Renewed interest in town hall meetings and direct democracy has given new life to this complaint. For example, in a recent monograph about the impact of polling on journalism, Alison Carper (1995) writes that “when polls dictate policy, the boundaries of representational government are being breached” (p. 7). Quoting Hume and Locke, she writes that the public is far too predisposed to its own interests to put them ahead of the common good. An argument that she raises against overreliance on what the public thinks in a number of venues—ranging from what kind of newspaper to publish to what kind of laws to enact.

4. *Polls measure nonopinions.* Why should the views of respondents who know little and have thought less about complicated issues be taken seriously? A good recent example in the *Houston Chronicle* editorial page (1995) complained of muddled poll results about the 104th Congress. It explained to its readers that “a major drawback in basing policy on polling data is that many of those polled have not thought long and deeply on the complicated issues about which they are being asked. And the typical pollster does not encourage reflection before response.”

We certainly see a lot of these complaints these days, but I was struck by how similar they are to the critiques of polling 50 years ago. One of the first things that I did in preparation for this talk was to look at what outsiders were saying about the polls as AAPOR came to life. Lindsay Rogers was the most famous poll basher of that era. It was he who named us “pollsters” in his book of that title, which railed against all aspects of polling from the very idea of defining public opinion to specific survey methods (Rogers 1949). Gallup's *Public Opinion Quarterly* response was that “Rogers contradicted himself in

every chapter.” “But the book served one useful purpose: . . . within its covers one will find a compendium of all the criticisms ever voiced against polls. I would require every student in a public opinion course to read it” (Gallup 1957, p. 26).

As entertaining as *The Pollsters* and Gallup’s responses were, I was more taken by the view of polling offered 50 years ago in *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Edwin Bernays (1945) and the responses to this piece in a subsequent *POQ* by Claude Robinson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Harry Field (*Public Opinion Quarterly* 1945). Bernays, an influential public relations figure, saw many good things in polling, but worried that polls were “potentially dangerous weapons in the hands of the unwise, the inept or the dishonest” (1945, p. 264).

He worried that (1) polls often lull leaders into the belief that they are safe from disapproval when quantitative percentages corroborate their own point of view; (2) polls have produced a leadership that is led by polls and destroys progressive action; they help maintain the status quo; (3) the voice of the people is portrayed as seemingly unchangeable in polls; and (4) public opinion is like an iceberg—the visible portion is the expressed attitudes, but the submerged portion is sometimes more powerful (Bernays 1945).

Bernays went on to say that the true function of attitude polls is to be a tool to aid leaders to fulfill their democratic function. He made a distinction between crystallized opinions and loosely held ones, which leaders or any other influence can affect.

By today’s standards this was a relatively mild and reasoned set of criticisms, but AAPOR’s leadership responded sharply, and in the way that clearly reflected who they were. Lazarsfeld was struck by the variance between the undertone of the article and its literal content (*Public Opinion Quarterly* 1945). He accused Bernays of not liking the polls. Nonetheless, he closed his response by saying that he was applying to Bernays for funds to study how to better educate readers and users of polls (one of Bernays’s two ways of dealing with the problems he detailed).

Robinson, a good businessman and a good Republican who founded the Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), one of the leading commercial firms of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, decried the idea of licensing pollsters, Bernays’s other recommendation. In Robinson’s words, “there is a high premium on honesty in public opinion research” (*Public Opinion Quarterly* 1945, p. 407), which was self-policed given the interplay between polling organizations and their clientele. “Laissez polling”—so to speak.

Field said Bernays was “on dangerous ground” himself in pointing a finger at polls as potentially dangerous, “because the very same

finger could be pointed at religion, freedom of the press and speech, and the democratic process itself” (Public Opinion Quarterly 1945, p. 403). However, he did go on to say that he liked the iceberg metaphor.

In this instance, and others, the pioneers of polling were quick to come to the defense of their work, particularly when those criticisms dealt with the impact of polls on society. I don’t see that same response today from the polling community. We are more apt to defend our techniques, and the reliability of our findings, than we are to take on those who raise the points I have been discussing. In fact, the only recent major defense of the role of public opinion polls has been made by historian Garry Wills (1994) in the *New York Times Magazine*, not too long ago.

Wills, in a very good presentation, points out that complaints about lack of leadership are common in every period of history and that accusing leaders of being followers because they watch polls is an oversimplification. He describes leadership as a balancing act, with polls showing good leaders how to juggle conflicting demands, and how to walk through the minefields. He wrote, “Can a politician know too much about the mood and thinking out there. It seems obscurantist to say so. The great leader uses every kind of knowledge that can be had” (Wills 1994, p. 48).

He goes on to say that even if there were no polls there would be some system of handicapping. And he provides a historical context in saying that “the power of public opinion existed long before the arrival of formal polling” (p. 49).

With regard to the president he says “some who say that Clinton listens too much, may not like what the polls are saying.” He closes his article by recalling Lyndon B. Johnson. “He learned that politicians live or die by the polls, one way or another—principally by the way they use them. If they *refuse* to use the polls, they end up with the polls using them” (p. 49).

Why did such an eloquent defense of our role in society and our impact on leadership come from a historian, and not from a survey researcher? Are we not hearing what others are saying? Do we agree more with our critics than Gallup, Roper, and Field did 50 years ago? Are we not as self-confident?

Are we too preoccupied with the problems of survey research from our own perspective? We legitimately worry about standards, about call-in polls, about fund-raising under the disguise of polling, and so on. These are important concerns, but we also have to recognize and deal with the ways the public, the press, and policymakers have come to view polling.

It is not only a matter of telling our side of the story. We need more than just rhetoric and advocacy. As individual researchers, perhaps as

an association, we have to take on as a priority dealing with concerns about the impact of polling on the democratic process.

Leaders understandably are discomfited by constant scrutiny of polls and the endless flow of unqualified opinion feedback. I think it is our responsibility to provide a greater sense of how much leeway leaders may really have and the potential for opinion change. We also have to say sometimes that we really don't know how much room they have for maneuver. That's easier said than done in an environment that rewards simple declarative sentences and penalizes seeming equivocation.

We have to say more about the fragility of our measures, including the fragility of some of our most tried-and-true questions. To that point, I have been struck by how little has been said and written about the role that the opinion polls played in discouraging major Democrats from running against George Bush in 1992. Bush had a 66 percent approval rating 13 months before he was ousted from office. There were other measures at the time that suggested he was more vulnerable than that rating implied, but 66 percent was a sobering number to all of the well-known Democrats who had vied for the nomination 4 years earlier. Judgments about the political environment, based largely on polling, fundamentally affected the course of that election, as well as the course of politics today.

In short, we have to concentrate more on the meaning of public opinion results. We have to explore the iceberg, so to speak. We also have to say more about this in the general media. I think publications like *Public Perspective* do a great service in disseminating polling analysis. But there is much more to be said.

I think there is a wonderful opportunity to look across the results of published polls and give policymakers a greater sense of what survey findings imply for them. If you look at what the major national polls each said individually about the American public's response to the "first 100 days," you get a good sense of public opinion. But, if you put all of the national polls together and look at them as a composite measure of public opinion, you get an even richer, more textured view of public opinion. I think this is an underexploited resource, waiting and needing to be tapped.

Yankelovich's attempt to develop a standard measure of the depth of attitudes, his "mushy" index, was an empirical attempt to put some qualifications on poll responses. It failed for a lot of reasons, but it was his effort to deal with this issue. The time is right for a similar but more effective approach (with a better name).

We have to work harder in exploring the link between what respondents know and what they believe. I think James Fishkin's experiment in Texas with a deliberative poll will be very interesting in this connec-

tion. I think the work that we have been doing at the Times Mirror Center, asking people what they know and relating it to how they feel about things, is also a step in that direction, and one that George Gallup advocated for many years. His approach, which he labeled the "Quintamensional design," was to find out what people know about complicated issues and make distinctions between informed and uninformed opinions. The work of the Times Mirror Center has been very much influenced by this philosophy.

To conclude, I want to refer back to a 1957 special edition of *Public Opinion Quarterly* that was devoted to the first 20 years of public opinion research. Most of the major polling figures, social scientists, and commercial researchers gave their perspectives on the new enterprise of survey research in that volume. But I was most taken by the thoughts of William Albig, a University of Illinois sociologist, because they were so prophetic. He observed that over the first 2 decades of survey research, methods had been refined, but the capacity for insightful generalization had atrophied.

In writing of the rise of the manipulator researcher (as he termed it), he said that "a loss of respect for their target, the common man, was an inevitable occupational hazard. Moreover, during the next 20 years, the 'common man' will inevitably appear to be even more uniformed, intellectually defenseless, and sentimentally maudlin, as he is increasingly belabored by interest groups using modern mass media" (Albig 1957, p. 16).

He went on to say, "I do not believe in the romantic idealization or defense of the abilities or potentialities of the 'common man.'" But, he added, most of America's political philosophers who were also practicing statesmen quite properly exhibited confidence in the sentiments of the general public. Large publics preserve the sentiments of the culture in which they live, and frequently exhibit the ability to choose with reasonable accuracy among the proposals which come from leaders and from that stratum of the general public which is more broadly knowledgeable.

I believe this too. I think we have to do a better job defending that ability from those who doubt it. And do a better job in our research of reflecting the ability of the public to make wise judgments.

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