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The Changing Climate for Public Opinion Research

By GEORGE GALLUP

The public for public opinion polls has increased greatly in numbers and somewhat in sophistication during the past twenty years. Criticism has come heavily from academic circles; support largely from the layman. Polling errors in 1948 strengthened the position of surveys in the long run, and were partially responsible for the good showing made by the polls in 1956.

The author, Director of the American Institute of Public Opinion and a Past President of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, is a symbol of public opinion research to newspaper readers throughout the world. In addition, his pioneering work in the application of polling technique to a wide range of problems, his stimulation of interest in the survey method, and his activity in compiling vast quantities of valuable data have placed all social scientists heavily in his debt.

WHEN THE FIRST polls of public opinion appeared in the fall of 1935, politicians viewed them with suspicion. Political scientists and social scientists generally ignored them. And Washington correspondents and columnists openly attacked them. Only a few hardy editors and publishers had faith enough to print poll results.

To many there seemed to be something almost indecent about the very attempt to measure public opinion. Wasn't it an invasion of a field which should be left free and undefiled? Wasn't Montaigne right when he said: "Public opinion is a powerful, bold, and unmeasurable party"?

Those of us who launched this effort to measure public opinion by sampling methods did not regard public opinion as a mysterious force which manifested itself in unknown ways. To us, as to James Bryce, public opinion was the "aggregate of the views men hold regarding matters that affect or interest the community."

EARLY SUCCESS AND OPPOSITION

In the two decades since polls of public opinion were first launched, the frigid climate in which they started has moderated somewhat. But on occasion, icy blasts still sweep down upon us. Since we began this effort to gauge public opinion on a periodic basis, we have had our lucky breaks, as well as our unlucky ones. Against the misfortune of 1948 must be set the good luck of 1936—a time when we required a good break.

When polls were first launched, we had told the world that the new system of sampling was superior to that followed by the *Literary Digest*. In

fact, we were emboldened to say in print as early as July of 1936 that the *Literary Digest* would be wrong in November, and we were foolhardy enough to predict just what the *Digest* would find from its post-card poll of many millions.

Our predictions about the *Literary Digest* poll results came true. The *Digest* was not only wrong, but its error was almost exactly what we had said it would be. The sampling polls were on the right side, and by this very fact could lay claim to superiority over the straw vote methods which had prevailed up to that time.

The success of the scientific sampling polls in 1936 by no means stilled the critics. Many had paid little or no attention to them up to this point. Now they began to view polls with genuine alarm. Some claimed we were not measuring public opinion; public opinion could not be measured, at least not by the procedures we were using. Others said we were not scientific. Still others thought that we were an evil force which might lead the country straight to Hell—or to direct democracy, which they regarded as equally terrifying. An Oregon congressman introduced a bill to curb polls. The fight was on.

The most bitter critics were those whose political views placed them at the extreme right or left on the political spectrum. I can remember addressing a meeting on a college campus where I advanced the idea that the common people of the country display an extraordinary amount of good sense about the issues of the day. The left-wingers in the group nearly stoned me from the campus. In a naive way I had thought that they would welcome any facts showing that the collective judgment of the little people of the country was surprisingly sound. The extreme right wing was equally bitter in its views. Through the years the *Chicago Tribune* never missed an opportunity to flail us.

THE STORM AND SILVER LINING OF 1948

The battle raged back and forth, with the polls gaining ground through the pre-war and war years. Then came 1948! The avalanche descended. Latent animosities harbored against us were brought to the surface in an explosive manner. To many, the wrong predictions of 1948 proved that we were a snare and a delusion. It mattered little that nearly all the political writers and pundits of the country also were wrong. We were the proper whipping boy.

Within a few weeks after the 1948 election came the book by Lindsay Rogers, *The Pollsters*. Rogers had been one of our earliest critics and in *The Pollsters* he was at his entertaining best. In this very readable book, Rogers contradicts himself in almost every chapter, if not in every paragraph. But the book serves one very useful purpose: within its covers one will find a compendium of all criticisms ever voiced against polls. And I can say quite

honestly that if I were a professor, I would require every student in a public opinion course to read it.

Professor Rogers obviously has a keen mind. But his lack of knowledge about the operation of polls and their findings destroys his effectiveness as a critic of polls. His assumptions, beautifully stated though they be, can be "murdered by a gang of facts."

The reaction of the public to the 1948 debacle—in contrast to that of the critics—was enlightening. The public was quite willing to forgive and forget. We saved many a client newspaper by encouraging editors and publishers to send out their own reporters to poll their readers about polls and whether the newspaper should continue to print them. In every single instance a sizable majority of the public said, in effect: "Everyone makes mistakes. Polls serve a useful purpose. We hope you continue to print them."

In crucial periods support often comes from unexpected quarters. I recall the anguish of the late Dr. Kinsey when his first book had created a furore. He had expected that the ordinary citizens of the land would resent his intrusion into the sacrosanct area of sex, but that his fellow professors and scientists would rush to his defense. He was crushed to find that the opposite was the case. The cruel blows were struck by fellow professors. The public, on the other hand, looked upon his work as a worth-while contribution to a subject which needed ventilation and illumination.

LESSONS FROM ELECTION FORECASTING

All of us in the field of public opinion research regard election forecasting as one of our least important contributions. It has always seemed much more worth while to report public opinion on the political, social and economic issues of the day. At the same time, standing up to the rigorous test of election forecasting has had the effect of improving methods and increasing our knowledge of voting behavior.

Since 1936 we have carried on a broad experimental program to establish a system of predicting voting behavior. As early as 1940 we were experimenting with the use of the voting precinct as a sampling unit. In 1950, for the first time, we based our final prediction of the Congressional elections on a survey of a large sample of precincts. We used a precinct sample again in the 1952 Presidential election to measure late trends but not for our final figures. In 1954 and 1956, however, we depended entirely on the precinct sample.

We do not know whether a better system will be developed or not. The important point to keep in mind is that it took sixteen years of experimental work before we developed the sampling system we now have. Maybe this "lead" time is too long; but it must be kept in mind that congressional elections come only at two-year intervals, and presidential elections at four-year inter-

vals. In most areas of the physical and social sciences, experiments typically can be performed in a short period of time. In polling on national elections, the opportunities to test methods are few and far between.

The 1948 election, bitter experience though it was, proved a blessing in disguise. We learned that political sentiment can shift in the last few days of a campaign, and that we would have to devise machinery which would permit us to measure trends to the very end of a campaign. This we did in the elections of 1950 and 1952.

An interesting fact about the 1956 election is that if polling had stopped as early as it did in 1948, our error, percentage-wise, would have been almost as great as in 1948. When the revolts broke out in Hungary and the invasion of Egypt began, Eisenhower's strength jumped four and one-half percentage points. At election time, Eisenhower received 58 per cent of the national total—or three percentage points more than had been shown by polls made ten days previously.

No system of polling is perfect. And I have stated publicly many times that almost certainly polls will be wrong in some future election, particularly one which breaks near the fifty-fifty line. But we can look forward with greater equanimity to this part of our work. In this department, at least, the labors of the last twenty years have not gone for naught.

SOME DEPRECATORY VOICES CONTINUE

Despite the mountain of evidence that has been built up since 1935 to support the contentions of poll takers regarding the reliability of their findings, acceptance on the part of text-book writers proceeds at glacial speed. Invariably, any reference to polls must be qualified by some such statement as: "If you can believe the polls . . ." For some strange reason, this rule seems to apply only to those in our special field of polling. Fellow workers in other vineyards would regard it as definitely insulting if a survey of public opinion, undertaken in the Yale or Chicago Graduate School, were qualified by some such remark as, "If you can believe anything which comes out of the Yale Graduate School . . ." One can only hope that the day will arrive when our academic friends and text-book authors will have enough intellectual courage either to leave out their qualifying remarks, or else to come right out and say that we are mountebanks!

And while I am on this point, I would like to bring up another long-standing complaint of those of us who conduct polls. This is the use of quotation marks around the word "scientific" when applied to polls. If our work is not scientific, then no one in the field of social science, and few of those in the natural sciences, have a right to use the word. Even under the most rigid interpretation of the word I venture to say that our work fully qualifies.

Another deprecatory word which gets under our skins is the word "commercial." Anything that pays its own way is supposed to be contaminated in some strange manner. If the same standard is used, then most of the work which has been carried on in the field of nuclear physics is "commercial." At least this work is being paid for, and certainly it is not pursued solely for the sake of science. Most of the work now being done by university survey centers is paid for by business, charitable, or governmental organizations, but I believe that these university centers would resent the description of their work as "commercial."

WISDOM OF THE PUBLIC

I have often been accused of believing that "the voice of the people is the voice of God," but the two decades during which I have directed polling of the American public on nearly all the important issues of the day have provided me with ample opportunity to judge the collective views of my fellow citizens.

I am firmly convinced that if, during the last twenty years, public opinion had manifested itself only by letters to congressmen, the lobbying of pressure groups, and the reports of political henchmen—as it did prior to the advent of the sampling polls—the country would almost certainly have been led in the wrong direction at several critical points. The public is almost always ahead of its governmental leaders. This statement has been made many times, and it can be supported by an overwhelming volume of evidence amassed during these two decades on nearly every conceivable issue—political, social and economic.

Perhaps in an ideal state this should not be the case. But the plain, unadorned fact is that it is true, and anyone who wishes to compare the views of the people, as shown by thousands of cross-section surveys, with official views expressed in Washington, can easily prove it to his own satisfaction. It is my earnest hope that future writers on the subject of polls and pollsters will take time to consult the record before reaching their conclusions.