

Lesson Title: Polling Pitfalls

Handout #3: “Political Polling in Past and Present”

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The power of polling to shape the outcomes of elections is legion. The sheer number of polling organizations and projects grows constantly, illustrating the importance of the surveys which fill our airwaves, social media, and newspapers: there are organizations like Gallup, Roper, Rasmussen and Pew Research; news organizations Reuters, the Associated Press, and newspapers and television stations from coast to coast; university projects from Monmouth, Quinnipiac, Marist and more; market analysis from Bloomberg, The Economist, and the Wall Street Journal.

The constant trends that are shared with the American public shape party deliberations, election strategies, turnout, and voting booth decisions. If you've ever watched “The West Wing,” you've seen the fictionalized version of how polling actually affects the process of governance after the elections are over. Generations of presidents have clearly paid careful attention to polling numbers, especially about their own popularity.

Pollsters' predictions are correct, within a margin or error, almost all the time. Of course, the ones we hear about most are in the incorrect ones.

Pollsters' famous mistakes

The most infamous error the pollsters ever made was immortalized in the photograph of President Truman brandishing a premature edition of the Chicago Tribune with the banner headline, “Dewey Defeats Truman.” Truman won by a healthy 50-45% vote. Pollsters Gallup and Roper apologized for their failure to keep surveying voters up to the day of the election; both had skipped October altogether, believing that not very much would change in the final weeks of the campaign.

In the 2008 New Hampshire presidential primary, seven different polls indicated that Barack Obama would easily defeat Hillary Clinton by some 8%. Instead, Clinton beat Obama by a 39 to 36% margin. Post mortems by the polling organizations looked for the causes of their miscalculations. The final shift toward Clinton could have resulted from the Democratic candidates' debate on Sunday night, or a tearful moment that Clinton experienced in a New Hampshire diner. Notably, the turnout – especially of women – was much higher than expected when polls were taken of likely voters.

The most egregious of polling errors was the result of a survey of two million people made in 1936 by a magazine called Literary Digest, predicting that Alf

Landon would defeat incumbent President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a landslide, with 57% of the vote. Instead, President Roosevelt was easily re-elected with 63%. Newcomer George Gallup put together a scientifically random sampling of 50,000 people and claimed that the magazine was wrong. Although Literary Digest had contacted an enormous number of respondents, their sample was not representative – most were magazine readers who had more money than the rest of the Depression population. Literary Digest soon went out of business, while Gallup's mathematically sound procedures established him as the leading pollster in the country.

Statistically sound practices in the 21st century: Gallup today

The Gallup organization's early use of mathematically sound methods evolved through to the present, and its procedures are standard for today's pollsters. 350 days a year, Gallup interviews 1,000 U.S. adults aged 18 and older living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia in a dual-frame design, which includes both landline and cellphone numbers, using random-digit-dial methods. Landline respondents are selected at random within each household based on which member has the next birthday. Each sample of national adults includes a minimum quota of 60% cellphone respondents and 40% landline respondents. Gallup conducts interviews in Spanish for respondents who are primarily Spanish-speaking.

Sampling is weighted to adjust for many factors, to match the U.S. population according to gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, population density, and phone status. Gallup also weights samples to correct for unequal selection probability, nonresponse, and double coverage of landline and cellphones.

Issues that persist

There are problems that harm reliability, which can't be addressed by statistics. Dan Cassino cited one in the Harvard Business Review. "The problem comes if the sample isn't really random. After what was perceived as a disastrous first debate for Barack Obama against Mitt Romney in 2012, Democratic voters became less likely to answer surveys, as they just didn't want to talk about politics, while newly enthusiastic Republicans did. As a result, poll results shifted towards Romney, even though his actual support didn't increase: it's just that the samples were biased towards Romney voters. If the sample is bad, the results follow."

Frank Gallup spoke often about the problem of clean wording of survey questions. "Should we describe programs like food stamps and Section 8 housing grants as "welfare" or as "programs for the poor" when asking whether the public favors or opposes them? Should we identify the Clinton health care bill as health care "reform" or as "an overhaul of the health care system" when asking about congressional approval of the plan? ...Any of these wording choices could have a substantial impact on the levels of support recorded in the poll."

What if there had been political polling in past American elections?

Back when the information highway was an unpaved road, even a cattle track, candidates had little idea how their policies or campaign strategies were resonating in the electorate. We could play Doris Kearns Goodwin and examine this intriguing proposition.

What if there had been political polling in...

The Election of 1844

As the election of 1844 approached, the Whig candidate, Henry Clay, and the probable Democratic candidate, Martin Van Buren, went on record against the annexation of Texas. Clay wrote an open letter to the public warning that the annexation of Texas without the consent of Mexico would bring war. However, the Democratic convention was controlled by expansionists. The Democrats rejected Van Buren and chose James K. Polk of Tennessee, the first “dark horse” in American presidential history.

As it turned out, Clay had misjudged the temper of the nation. In the election the Democrats narrowly captured the presidency, with their slogans about expansion from sea to sea, including the annexation of both Oregon and Texas. When the votes were counted, Clay had lost by only 38,175 votes out of the 2,636,311, just 1.4% of the ballots cast.

If Clay had polling results that showed how popular expansionism was, would he have written that open letter?

With polling information, what else might Clay have done to win over expansionist voters without supporting the annexation of Texas?

The Election of 1896

Few presidential campaigns compare in color or enthusiasm with the “free silver campaign” of 1896. Interest in the election brought out 2,000,000 more voters than in 1892. Republican William McKinley conducted a “front porch campaign” from his home in Canton, Ohio. Hundreds of Republican speakers blanketed the country from coast to coast, spreading the Republican message in many languages to reach the new immigrants who had become voting citizens. They pictured the Republicans as the party of a “full dinner pail” and McKinley as the advance agent of prosperity.

William Jennings Bryan, the 36 year old from Nebraska, won the Democratic nomination at the convention with his stunning populist attack on Wall Street, the famous “Cross of Gold” speech. He attacked the gold standard as an assault by the richest Americans on the rest of the country. He traveled across 18,000 miles in 29 states, making some 600 speeches to an audience of over five million listeners. Wherever he traveled, the brilliant young orator aroused tremendous enthusiasm. But when the votes were counted, the result was a victory for McKinley and the Republicans, including Republican control of both houses of Congress.

If Bryan had known how popular the simple “full dinner pail” appeal was, would he have changed the speeches he gave, which were based on a more complex understanding of monetary policy?

What else might Bryan have borrowed from the McKinley campaign, with polling to show its effectiveness?

The Election of 1912

The aggression between President William Howard Taft and past President Theodore Roosevelt led to a fierce struggle for the Republican Party nomination. Roosevelt seemed the more electable candidate, but the less popular incumbent, Taft, had the support of the Old Guard Republicans. At the convention, the Taft forces were in control, and Taft was re-nominated on the first ballot.

Roosevelt's delegates refused to accept defeat, and formed a third Progressive Party to nominate Roosevelt. When asked how he felt about this new party, TR replied in his typical style that he felt "as strong as a bull moose," christening the party as the Bull Moose Progressives.

Meanwhile Democratic nominee Woodrow Wilson showed himself to be a clear and eloquent speaker. He became the spokesman of middle class American who wanted a society free from the control of big organizations. With the Republican vote split between Taft and Roosevelt, Wilson rode to victory.

With accurate polls that showed how much more popular Roosevelt was than Taft, how might have the Old Guard planned the convention?

Do you think that political polling showing that a three-way race would lead toward a Wilson victory would have convinced Roosevelt to pull out of the race? Why or why not?

The Election of 1928

The Republican convention of 1928 nominated Herbert Hoover, and the Democrats nominated New York Governor Alfred E. Smith, both on the first ballot. The rival party platforms were markedly alike. As a result, the campaign became a contest of backgrounds and personalities.

Hoover had the great advantage of the prosperity of the country under two previous Republican administrations. His past record included heading humanitarian relief efforts in war-torn Europe during World War I. Hoover had never held elective office, which was considered an advantage in contrast with Smith, who had gotten his hands dirty for years in New York politics, including connections to the bosses of New York City's crooked Tammany Hall. Al Smith was also a Catholic, and supported the repeal of Prohibition. His Lower East Side New York background aroused fears and prejudices in the heartland.

Hoover defeated Smith, and headed into the vortex of the stock market crash and the Great Depression.

If polling had shown the extent of anti-Catholic feeling in the nation, would the Democrats have selected another standard bearer?

Who else might they have chosen? Franklin Delano Roosevelt?