

From the Field

Auto-Dialing for Data

A reply to Scott Rasmussen

By Michael W. Traugott

Editor's note: The following is a response to Scott Rasmussen's article, "For 'Yes,' Press 1," which appeared in the September/October issue of Public Perspective.

Scott Rasmussen's "Portrait of America" website represents both the potential and the pitfalls of automated data collection. You can find a torrent of information on the website, more so than in his article, about how his firm collects information on the telephone. But there is inadequate supporting documentation to permit a trained observer to evaluate fully the quality of the data—and this means that an untrained and even gullible public is at some risk of being misled.

I deliberately avoid using the term "poll" or "survey" in describing Rasmussen's results because the methodology does not satisfy some of the basic requirements of a scientific survey. Rasmussen himself describes his work only as "statistically reliable" and "validated by other opinion polls and actual election returns."

A scientific survey begins with a probability design for the sample, employing a frame that represents the target population. During the field work, a number of procedures are employed to secure a high response rate. Both of these conditions are necessary to invoke well-grounded statistical theory that permits a researcher to calculate the degree and level of confidence in a particular result. Absent a probability sample or a reasonable response rate, a researcher can have a long run of relatively precise estimates by chance alone, with no sense at all of how precise the next estimate might be.

In the Rasmussen studies, there is no indication that the data collection involves a probability sample with a reasonable response rate. There is a suggestion that it starts with a purchased sample of telephone numbers, just the way a lot of other telephone surveys do. But when he claims that "one out of every four or five adults reached will complete a full interview," it sounds like Rasmussen computes his success rate on the basis of "contacts" rather than according to the

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Standard Definitions published by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) for calculating a variety of response rates. A great number of replacement telephone calls have to be made to produce 1,000 or more completed interviews in a day, inevitably resulting in a very low true "response rate."

Rasmussen will have to provide additional information about the disposition of his sample in order for others to have confidence in his sampling methodology. Further, AAPOR and the National Council on Public Polls (NCP) call for much more detailed information in their standards for disclosure. The "Portrait of America" site offers little beyond question wording and order, omitting such important information as how "likely voters" or "television viewers" are defined.

Every survey involves tradeoffs among speed of data collection, budget, and resulting data quality. A key question about Rasmussen's work is how good the quality of the data can be when they are collected so rapidly and cheaply. This is not just a problem for his firm—it is potentially a problem for the industry as a whole as pressures grow to collect more data more quickly, fueled by the rapid increase in websites that contain "data."

The first point to understand is that running websites intensifies the need for fresh content. The short form of the story goes like this: If you have a heavily visited website, you can run more ads and charge more for their placement. In order to get more "hits," the content has to be continuously updated or freshened. The best way to guarantee a steady flow of information is to control its production. That is the service Rasmussen provides for "Portrait of America" owner, TownPagesNet.com, an internet firm in the United Kingdom.

This responsibility for content production is clearly acknowledged in an April 17, 2000 press release available on "Portrait of America." Rasmussen has set an ambitious goal for his business:

To put our content generating capacity into perspective, we plan to publicly release more polling data every year than the rest of the industry combined. Within five to ten years, Rasmussen Research will have generated more than half of all the publicly released polling data issued throughout history.¹

The main Rasmussen claim is that “we regularly... [conduct] statistically reliable public opinion surveys using an automated interviewing technique.” To validate this claim, he cites results from the company’s work in two areas: the presidential primaries and various policy-related questions.

Commercial pollsters have always tried to establish their credibility in the political arena with their pre-election polls. This is mainly due to the external validation that comes from checking late campaign pre-election poll estimates against the vote returns. Most polling organizations have devoted extensive methodological research to determining who is likely to vote and what to do with undecided voters, and most have enviable records of accuracy.

Research on survey non-response increasingly suggests that the correlates of refusing to be interviewed are also the correlates of not voting. This seems to work to the advantage of political pollsters, although the exact process by which it does is not yet fully specified. And it seems to be working for Rasmussen, too, although not quite to the extent asserted.² His main claim for his political work is that, “For each primary, the leader in our final pre-election poll emerged victorious on election day.” This is not a very stringent test for accuracy. For example, in his article he provides estimates of the outcome for George W. Bush and John McCain in seven state primaries. In six of the projections, he underestimated the results by a small amount (although he missed the actual McCain vote by 11 percentage points among Republican voters in California, and in Missouri he missed the McCain vote by 9 points).

But what about some of the data he omits? To select just one example, a final “Portrait of America” release about the Washington state primary from February 28 indicated, “Bush is leading all who will vote for a Republican by a margin of 46% to 40%” over McCain. The results were Bush 48.3% and McCain 48.0%. On the Democratic side, the release indicated, “Al Gore has a commanding lead over Bill Bradley—54% to 30%.” The final Democratic result was Gore 68.2% and Bradley 31.4%—a 37 percentage-point victory rather than a 24-point one.

More important issues arise in the measurement of attitudes or preferences in non-political areas. Some of the data collection for the Rasmussen website is merely the tabulation of “votes” reflecting public preferences for the top five college football teams in the country (among “college football fans,” however they are defined) or for favored winners of Emmy awards (among “television viewers,” however defined). But citizens’ attitudes about policy preferences are more subtle and subject to question wording and order effects, many of which are difficult to sort

out. Some policy preferences are quite complex and require multiple questions to evaluate different dimensions in the attitude structure.

In his article, Rasmussen presents some of his results alongside those of “comparable” surveys conducted by other organizations. The results of one question come from a July 6, 2000 release with the headline, “Most Americans Still Support Death Penalty.” In this survey, the following question was asked fifth, following a series about the execution of Gary Graham in Texas in a June 25 survey:

Should the death penalty be allowed in America?



These results are compared to the following Gallup Poll results obtained in a survey conducted June 23-25, 2000 using the following question wording:

Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?



When ABC News asked a slightly different version of the same question on June 14-18, 2000 they obtained the following results:

Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?



Should these different question wordings have produced such similar results? Perhaps, if one believes that attitudes on the death penalty represent a kind of core value. Then the expressed attitudes might be impervious to such variations in question wording, as might be the case in this instance.

But let’s take another example that illustrates both the selectivity of some of the comparisons and the effects of question form and wording. Rasmussen compares his findings on school vouchers with another Gallup survey and finds virtually identical levels of support. Rasmussen’s data are based upon 9,400 completed interviews conducted in a week, including 2,029 parents of public school students. His data come from the following question:

Proposals have been made that parents should be given vouchers so that they can choose which public or private school their children will attend. Is this a good idea?



Yes		54%
No		28
Not sure		18

A similar question in a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll that never used the word “voucher” produced similar support in 1999, but not in 2000:

A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?

	1999	2000
Favor	51%	45%
Oppose	47	52
Don't know	2	3

Among parents of public school children, the data for the “Favor” position look like this:

Rasmussen - 2000		56%
Gallup - 2000		47%
Gallup - 1999		60%

Are these the same results? It depends upon the year you choose.

Both Gallup and Rasmussen asked several other questions about the issue, and they produced quite different results. For example, in the Gallup survey, only 39% supported the voucher concept and 56% opposed it when the question was phrased as, “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?” And when the question was phrased as, “Which one of these two plans would you prefer—improving and strengthening the existing public schools or providing vouchers for parents to use in selecting and paying for private and/or church-related schools?” then only 22% supported vouchers and 75% opposed them. When Rasmussen asked about a preferred response to overcrowding and rapid growth, 44% of all adults said “build new schools” while 41% said “provide vouchers.”


Finally, it is important to point out that Gallup frequently asks an open-ended question, as follows: “What action by the federal government do you think would be most effective in helping to improve public schools in the United States

today?” The most frequent volunteered responses include “spending more money” and “standards for teachers.” Typically only 2 or 3% volunteer a response in support of vouchers. Alternatively, Rasmussen automated telephone methodology rarely utilizes open-ended items.

So do Americans support education vouchers? My net assessment of all of this evidence is “No,” although it depends on how you ask the question and maybe when you ask it.

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If we want to think of Rasmussen Research as a content provider of information about popular views in the same way that *Entertainment Tonight* or *Inside Edition* blur the distinction between news and entertainment, that is fine. Until there is more information about their methods and a longer track record to evaluate their results, we shouldn’t confuse the work they do with scientific surveys, and it shouldn’t be called polling.

Everyone involved with the polling profession needs to understand the risks involved in public misperceptions about the differences between rigorous scientific work and content that simply fills space on websites. Some of the latter work will be based on responses from people who volunteer them without any pretense of sampling, while others will reflect information from studies conducted very quickly with resulting low response rates. The public can’t perceive the difference, but responsible professions will be obligated to point it out. 

Endnotes

¹Available at www.portraitofamerica.com/html/poll-371.html, accessed on September 14, 2000.

²Among other things, his relative accuracy is not quite as high as touted in his piece, as illustrated by the following quote from the *Progressive Review* archives in May (available at prorev.com/politics5.htm, visited on September 14, 2000): *We have corrected our pollster run-off figures, adding results for Rasmussen Research as well as adjusting returns to final official results, including mail ballots. Based on three to five polls each, Mason-Dixon is first, followed by Gallup, Rasmussen and Zogby. While this order is slightly different than what we published yesterday, these firms’ results vary by less than 2 points from each other, with an average error of 4.5 points from the final returns.*