

**THE POLLS AND THE 1989 ELECTIONS:
WHAT WENT WRONG**
**Background: The Problem of Greatly
Increased Refusal Rates**

By Harry W. O'Neill

In a Roper survey conducted several years ago, over half the public reported that they think a rapid depletion of our natural resources is likely in the coming years. And, of 13 future problems, the depletion of our resources ranked second as a serious threat to life as we now know it. A more recent survey shows that over six people in ten believe we are in danger of running out of one of our most basic resources, clean air. Interesting, you might say, but of what relevance to us in survey research? Just as we, as citizens, took our natural resources for granted for so long and only began to register concern as evidence of our neglect mounted, so we, as researchers, have taken our most valuable resource for granted for too long and only now are beginning to appreciate the potential effect on life in the research world as we now know it.

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The resource of which I speak is, of course, the public—the source of our data. Is the public really a diminishing resource? The answer, I submit, is a resounding "yes," and as proof, I ask you to consider the high rate of refusals that we are experiencing. In 1985 and again in 1988, the "Your Opinion Counts" Public Education Program, a joint effort of six major industry associations, sponsored a nationwide refusal rate study. Under the direction of Jack Ross of J. Ross Associates and with the participation of member firms of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO, the trade association of the commercial survey research industry), completion/refusal data were obtained from well over a million interview contacts made in September each year. In both years the overall refusal rate from all surveys included in the studies was 38%, most of which — over 80% — was accounted for by "initial refusal" — before and during the introduction. Whatever the reason, a sizeable proportion of our basic resource is not there when we need it — and the results are less effective samples and increased costs.

The higher the refusal rate, the greater is the self-selection of the respondents being interviewed. The greater the self-selection, the less representative the sample. The seriousness of this problem varies, of course, with the nature of a particular study, but high refusal rates are never good.

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Whether or not refusal rate is crucial to the issue of sample representativeness for a given study, refusal rate has significant cost implications. Quite simply, as the refusal rate goes up, so do field costs.

The problem those of us in survey research now face is not, of course, entirely of our own making. Changes in our environment have contributed to it. But we must respond to these changes as well as to our own actions that reduce cooperation. We must handle our resource, the public, with care and treat it with respect. We must never forget that respondents are partners in our research endeavors. We must recognize that we have ethical obligations to these partners and that, as we discharge them, we help meet the refusal problem.

What Should Be Done?

We should discharge our ethical obligations in four ways: (1) by never violating the principle of confidentiality; (2) by stressing the principle of privacy; (3) by improving the professionalism of interviewers; and (4) by educating the public as to the purposes and benefits of our research activities. Let's look at each of these.

The principle of confidentiality is the keystone of our relationship with respondents. The CASRO Code of Standards states that "survey research organizations have the responsibility to protect the identities of respondents and to insure that individuals and their responses cannot be related." This means:

(1) that the research company's personnel are to be restricted from the use of respondent-identifiable data beyond legitimate internal research purposes;

(2) that the researcher is responsible for seeing that subcontractors and consultants are aware of and agree to the principle of confidentiality;

(3) that clients are to be denied access to respondent-identifiable data except for validation or other legitimate research purposes and then only with written assurance that respondent confidentiality will be maintained;

(4) that invisible identifiers are not to be used on mail questionnaires; and

(5) that the use of survey results in a legal proceeding does not relieve the research company of its ethical obligation to maintain respondent confidentiality and anonymity.

Second, our respect for the public also must be demonstrated through the principle of privacy. The CASRO Code provides that "survey research organizations have a responsibility to strike a proper balance between the needs for research in contemporary American life and the privacy of individuals who become respondents in the research." Every reasonable effort should be made to ensure that the respondent understands the purpose of the interviewer-respondent contact, and its voluntary character. The refusal rate studies referred to earlier showed that when the introduction to the survey told the respondent what the interview was about and something about its purpose, refusals were reduced.

Further, interviewing times should be arranged that are convenient for respondents. Changing lifestyles — such as the increase in single person households and dual-income households — have resulted in many people having considerably greater demands on their time and, thus, less discretionary time. Busy Americans are demanding more control over their free time and their demands are being met — by such items as microwave ovens, take-out food, VCRs, and telephone answering machines. We are going to have to learn to adjust to our respondents' schedules, not expect them to accede to ours as readily as they once did.

The research need should be weighed against the length of the interview so as to minimize the time burden, and respondents *should never* be enticed into an interview situation by a misrepresentation of the length of the interview. We know that

the refusal rate increases with interview length. Not only are overly long questionnaires an infringement on respondents' time, but as boredom and fatigue set in, *response quality* deteriorates. I really wonder how much confidence we can have in either the representativeness of the sample or the meaningfulness of the data that are based on 500 people who are willing to talk to us for 40 minutes about the attributes of oven cleaners.

Third, critical to the discharge of our ethical and partnership responsibilities to the public is improving the professionalism of interviewers. It is the interviewer in whose hands we leave assurances of confidentiality. We, as researchers, may write statements, but it is the interviewer who has to be believed. For most respondents, the interviewer is the only visible aspect of the research process. It is the interviewer — through his or her conduct, mannerisms, and appearance — who gains, or loses, the public's participation in research projects. We had better be more concerned with the level of training, motivation, supervision, and remuneration of those who collect our data.

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The fourth way in which we must discharge our obligations to the public is to educate them about the purpose of our research. We need to aggressively distinguish our activities from those that are sales-oriented and from the well-publicized but ill-conceived phone-in polls. If we ask people to give us their time, they should be confident it is for a worthwhile cause.

In short, if we are to make progress on the refusal rate problem, we must keep in mind that, as respondents, the public is owed a pleasant, or at the very least, a minimally burdensome experience; its anonymity must be guaranteed; its privacy respected; and it should be made aware of the relevance and importance of its participation.

Harry W. O'Neill is Vice Chairman of the Roper Organization, Inc.