

Read the Book

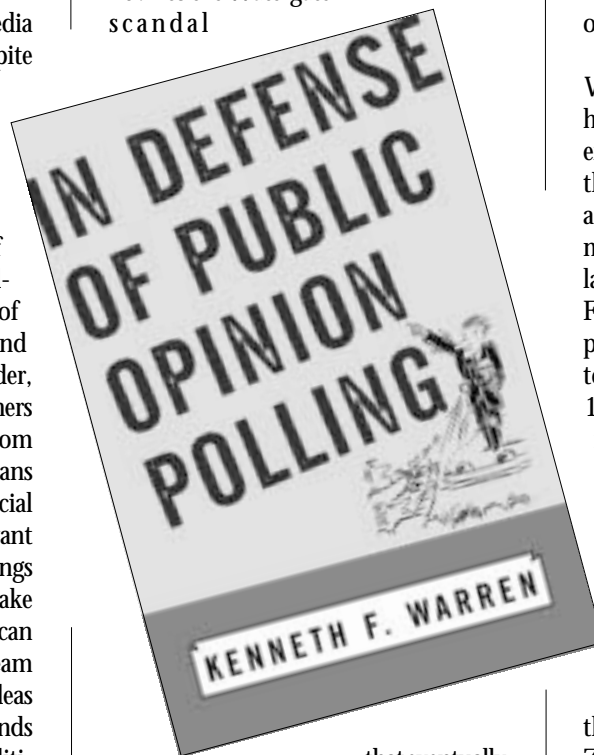
An excerpt from *IN DEFENSE OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLING*
By Kenneth F. Warren

Polls Help Us To Record and Interpret History

Historians crave knowledge about what happened in the past. It is inconceivable that historians would ignore looking at poll data from the distant past to help them interpret historical events, if poll data in fact existed. For polls disclose fascinating information and insights into what was going on in the past. This is the main reason why polls have grown in popularity, especially with the media because journalists know that, despite the poll bashers, people in general love to ponder poll results. This is true because polls help satisfy an instinctive curiosity that humans seem to have, that is, polls tell us what others think about all sorts of things. Such curiosity starts in childhood. What does mommy think of this, what does daddy think of that, and do my friends like me? As we grow older, we want to know more of what others think about virtually everything from entertainers and movies to politicians and their ideas and programs. Social psychologists acknowledge that we want to know what others think about things so we can fit in. On one level, we all take cues from opinion surveys so we can conform to social norms and mainstream thinking. The promotion of radical ideas may cost the average person some friends or loss of membership in a club; a politician may lose the upcoming election; or a business may suffer the loss of clients and profits.

Scholars understand the appeal and value of polls. No measurement can record the feelings of people during a moment in history better than public opinion polls. Presidential scholar James Pfiffner, after acknowledging the unique ability of modern polling to measure public opinion accurately, adds that “by examining

these polls historically we can try to understand the waxing and waning popularity of presidents.” Polls, for example, gave us enlightening insights into the rise and fall and rise and fall again of Richard Nixon during the course of his on-again-off-again political career—from his rise to national prominence as President Eisenhower’s VP after his famous and successful “Checkers speech” to his loss to John Kennedy in the 1960 presidential race to his losing bid to become governor of California in 1962 to his dramatic political comeback that allowed him to win the presidency in 1968 and 1972 to the Watergate scandal



that eventually forced him to resign the presidency in disgrace. The opinion pollsters were there to track the public’s opinion toward Nixon every step of the way. Political historians, political scientists, and the American people in general understand Nixon’s career more today in part because of the insights the polls have given us. The historical poll data, for instance, show us what people originally liked about him, what certain groups always disliked about him, what public

sentiment allowed him to win the presidency in 1968 and win big in 1972, and what caused him to fall from over 70% public approval ratings in the polls right after his State of the Union speech in January of 1973 to support low in the 20s in August of 1974 when he resigned. Pollsters were able to measure what contributed to his rise and fall with the American people with great precision. As he fell during the Watergate scandal, for example, the polls traced his demise as he lost more and more support from Nixon-Democrats, Independents, Republicans, labor, business groups, professional associations, churches, and most of all, with the American citizenry.

Without polls, it would be futile for historians and other scholars to try to examine or explain certain things about the past—why a politician won or lost an election, or attitudes toward governmental policies. For example, in a book largely rooted in poll data, William Flanigan and Nancy Zingale employ poll data to explain American attitudes toward domestic policy from 1973 to 1996 regarding governmental spending. By relying on poll data over nearly a quarter of a century, they are able to graph the changing attitudes of Americans toward spending in areas such as health care, welfare, and the environment. Just a glance at their graphs provides readers with valuable statistical data on how support for these areas has changed over the years. In one graph, Flanigan and Zingale are able to show “Attitudes Toward Cutting Spending Versus Increasing Services” by various demographical traits, including region of country, race, ethnicity, religion, and educational level. Only poll data can accurately provide such fascinating and valuable information. But public opinion polls do not focus on just politics. Since the dawn of public opinion polling, pollsters have tapped the opinion of Americans on about every conceivable subject from favorite entertainers, to

the ice cream they like, to sexual preferences. Some of these polls are just plain silly, but the legitimate polls conducted on all sorts of subjects have recorded valuable, historical information about the changing American culture; these polls will be archived and examined by historians as they look back on American history.

Still not convinced about the historical value of polls? Can you imagine how much better we would understand our past if pollsters had been there to accurately tap public opinion on the different personalities, events, and issues of the day? The one thing that polls do very well is to dispel false impressions and expose myths. Assuming we could look at poll data going way back in history, we could learn the truth about historical figures and their times, destroying misperceptions about these people and the events of their day. Yes, some of our legendary heroes and much celebrated events might suffer as a result, but wouldn't it be nice to know how the Greeks regarded Plato? Did he command a lot of respect, or was he an unpopular nerd? Would Julius Caesar have won high job approval ratings? Did the British people really support King George III's war against American independence? What did the French actually think when Napoleon pronounced himself Emperor of France? Was George Washington as admired and as popular as Americans are led to believe? What popular support existed for the Civil War among Northerners in 1860? And, what percentage of the German people supported Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany during the 1930s? The answers to these questions and related questions would provide historians with insights that would no doubt alter their interpretations of historical figures and events.

Would people in past times have been better off if pollsters were around to conduct polls? This is a very intriguing

and provocative question. Without thinking, those who hate polls would not hesitate to answer with a resounding "No!" But if George Gallup was right in his contention that elitist leaders hate polls because polls disclose the real feelings of the people, thus preventing these elites from pretending to speak for the people, the answer would be "Yes!" Many tyrants in world history have taken power and ruled ruthlessly, often asserting that their tough rule has the support of the people. It is very doubtful that such leaders could govern with any credibility if public opinion polls existed to contradict their claims. As Machiavelli noted in *The Prince*, leaders cannot survive without the support of others, nor can leaders endure if the vast majority of people condemn their governance. At least to me, the existence of public opinion polls would have had a positive impact on world history because the very unpopular, whether in politics or elsewhere, would have had a more difficult time surviving because vital high-level support would

tend to vanish if it became obvious that public support was lacking. Even the thinking of tyrants would have been tempered by poll results showing virtually no public support for their contemplated actions, if for no other reason than their own self-preservation.

Just look at the situation today regarding the acceptance of polls in different countries. Truly democratic nations such as the United States have no real problems with the use of polls. However, . . . nondemocratic countries like China or struggling democracies like Yugoslavia have problems with polls because their experiments with polls have proved somewhat disruptive to governance, especially when the opinion polls disclosed that the vast majority of the people were highly critical of the leaders and their policies.

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