

POLLS THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

Public Perspective asked 10 specialists in public opinion research to write short essays on "the most important poll, or use of survey research, I've ever encountered." We thought, in planning this series, that experts' answers to this question would be interesting. They are. But we also thought they would contribute to a substantial, ongoing aim of this review -- taking stock of the profession's work. Here: What are we proudest about, or where do we think polls have made a useful difference?

GEORGE GALLUP, JR. AND ALEC GALLUP, The Gallup Organization:

Our choice is the 1975 international survey, *Human Needs and Satisfaction*, which took the psychological pulse of citizens in 70 nations. Though many international surveys had been conducted prior to that date, and more subsequently, the 1975 survey was the first truly global one, representing almost two-thirds of the human race. Taken by Gallup-affiliated organizations around the world, its object was to assess the happiness, ambitions, worries and problems of the world's inhabitants, and to probe their attitudes toward issues of global concern. The study taught us a lot about the material and psychological well-being of humanity.

Human Needs and Satisfaction was the culmination of nearly 40 years of development in the sophistication and reach of scientific survey research. The people who made it happen were "pioneers," in the literal sense of the word. The small handful of men who launched public opinion polling in their respective countries immediately before and after World War II faced a lot of ignorance and some hostility. In this adverse environment, and having little experience upon which to draw, they were forced to demonstrate the reliability of the sample method.

Four factors helped them achieve recognition and gain acceptance for opinion research as a valuable tool in problem solving:

1. Performance in Election Surveys. If a survey operation is faulty in any basic function — sampling, interviewing, or questionnaire design — the problem is likely to show up in election survey work. The latter provided opportunities to convince skeptics that survey methods are valid.

2. Cooperative Spirit of Respondents.

The first American polls (Roper, Gallup and Crossley) proved that most citizens were willing to be interviewed by strangers and give honest answers, though early critics predicted failure on both counts. The unanswered question in terms of the future of international research was: Would the people of other societies be willing to open their doors and talk freely? The answer, fortunately, proved to be "yes."

3. Overcoming Communications Barriers.

Surveys have opened up a new type of communication — between the people of different nations and among the people within a single nation. Researchers in the international field have had, however, to face up to both language and cultural communication barriers. The problem of collecting survey data is formidable in some nations. For instance, the Indian Institute of Public Opinion must deal with 21 languages and scores of dialects. In some patriarchal societies, men are reluctant to let their wives be interviewed. In other nations, cultural traditions dictate that one does not give a negative answer to questions, so respondents feel compelled to give the interviewer the answers they think he wants.

4. The Early Researchers. Another important reason why public opinion polling has made the progress it has internationally is the personal tenacity, energy, and enterprise of the pioneers, as well as their willingness to cooperate with one another. I often think how fortunate it is that the three key US figures - George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley — were not only close friends with deep respect for each other, but also men of the highest integrity. The history of polling might have been otherwise had this not been so.

The science of polling, now a half-century later, has become firmly established internationally in a number of respects. Survey research has spread to all corners of the globe, now including eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Virtually, every area of life has been explored, even some formerly considered off limits, such as sexual behavior. A remarkably high level of accuracy has been achieved in sampling populations, attested to by the record of survey organizations in estimating the outcome of national elections. Surveys have given the public a voice on all the important topics facing their lives. As a result of surveys on virtually every known topic, we know our history in a fashion not possible in any preceding society.

The immediate future is an exciting one. Especially gratifying is availability of scientific surveying to newly-free nations, in eastern Europe and elsewhere, as they struggle to develop free market economies and governments responsive to the popular will.

BURNS W. ROPER, The Roper Organization:

Deciding what is the "most ingenious" poll I know of, or the "most successful," or the "Most competent" would be difficult. To decide what is the "most important poll or use of survey research," seems to me nearly impossible. I would have to narrow it down to three polls — not one — that were all done more or less simultaneously. The three would be the Crossley, Gallup, and Roper election prediction polls in 1936.

Why are they the most important? Because they were more instrumental than any other polls I can think of in establishing and gaining acceptance for "scientific" opinion polling, based

on small, carefully selected samples. The 1936 election had high visibility because of "that man" and the Depression. The Literary Digest, which had managed to get the winners right over the years, based on millions of straw ballots, predicted Landon would win. The three upstart, and "tiny" (by Literary Digest standards) polls all predicted a Roosevelt win. The contrast between the approach of the new surveys and that of the Literary Digest polls, coupled with the fact that the former were right and the latter wrong, received enormous attention. The experience went far in putting to rest the idea that "you can't tell what a nation of 125 million people thinks by interviewing only 3 or 4 thousand people." (Today, of course, it's 250 million people and interviews with only 1 or 2 thousand people!)

These three 1936 election polls were not important in the sense of saving democracy, or righting the social ills that existed in the '30s, or solving the economic problems, or contributing to greater understanding by the haves of the have nots. But, more than any other three polls — or even any hundred others — they established contemporary survey research as a viable method of determining what the public thinks. They launched modern opinion polling. And, while they did not precede the use of sampling for market research purposes, they gave credibility and impetus to market research that it had not attained on its own.

DANIEL YANKELOVICH, DYG Inc.:

I find it difficult to identify "the most important poll or use of survey research that I've encountered." Too many ghosts from the past 35 years make their claims. Instead I will briefly mention three projects that stay in my mind as having some special significance.

1. US - Soviet Relations. At just about the time Mr. Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, I was invited to join

an organization, the Dartmouth Conferences, that had been in existence since 1960. It was created in the aftermath of the U-2 incident, at President Eisenhower's urging, to insure that some sort of contact between Americans and Soviets would continue, however bad official relations became. The 30th anniversary of the Dartmouth Conferences will be held this July in Tallin, Estonia. From 1985 to the present, at meetings both in the USSR and the US, I have had the opportunity to interpret American public opinion to Soviet officials close to Mr. Gorbachev. Drawing upon polls conducted by my own firm and others, I have struggled to explain the fragile balance between the American public's long held mistrust of Soviet intentions and its powerful yearnings for peaceful relations between the two countries.

From the outset, the discussions focused on what would be required to improve US-Soviet relationships. (In 1985 and 1986, the majority of Americans still believed that relations between the two countries were getting worse, and that the policy of choice for the United States was "to get tougher" in our dealings with the Soviet Union, rather than to reduce tensions.) The Soviets badly underestimated the heritage of mistrust felt by Americans as the result of forty years of adversarial relations. I believe the poll data gave the Soviets a much more nuanced picture of the US scene than they had and thus contributed to a more constructive climate.

My experience suggests that elites in many countries do not understand American public opinion. They regard it as volatile, unreliable and sometimes irrational. A sympathetic interpretation that shows why Americans hold the views they do, and why these make sense, can work wonders, I wish someone would perform this service for US-Japanese relationships.

2. New Youth Values. I look back with pleasure on the opportunity I had in the 1960s and 1970s to track and record a

cultural phenomenon of great significance: the emergence on the nation's college campuses of new moral values which fed the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the consumer movement, the environmental movement, and the women's movement. First for Fortune, next for CBS News, and then for the JDR3rd Fund, my firm conducted annual tracking surveys from the mid sixties to the mid seventies that preserve for historians a record of the early stages of what has proved a vast cultural transformation.

3. The New Work Ethic. In the early 1980s, I worked with the non-profit Public Agenda Foundation (which Cyrus Vance and I had founded in the mid-seventies) on a series of studies of the work ethic. Some of these surveys were conducted in the US, others in Europe and Japan. They showed that a new work ethic had emerged to replace the old battered Protestant work ethic. The new ethic leads to a different kind of "social contract" than the old one. In the old, men were not expected to enjoy their work: in fact, moral virtue came from a willingness to sacrifice on the job for the sake of a better living for one's family.

The new work ethic sweeps these attitudes aside. Encompassing women as well as men, it derives its energies from the expectation that paid work should be meaningful in its own right, should provide challenge and opportunities for growth as well as income, and permit considerable autonomy on the job. Thus the new work ethic places great emphasis on the concept of "discretionary effort" — the jobholder's freedom to give — or to withhold — his or her best efforts to the job. Most businesses are organized as if the old work ethic still held sway. But gradually, they are learning that the competitive challenge from abroad requires them to readjust their thinking — and organizational structure — to accommodate the new norms.

HUMPHREY TAYLOR, Louis Harris and Associates:

Beware of hubris. The PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE risks encouraging the polling industry's delusion of grandeur. As I remembered all the surveys I'd been involved with which I thought important, I could feel myself puffing up with pride. The tough part was choosing just one survey. I rejected a great many in favor of a strange survey my colleagues and I conducted in Britain in 1972, on the somewhat esoteric subject of *hypothermia* — low body temperatures — among the elderly.

This survey was designed to determine whether hypothermia was a widespread condition. The medical establishment had ignored it. In general, doctors are very unsmart about home care for geriatric patients. The British government insisted there was no problem. To admit it would require spending money to deal with it. But — the human element — my father, a country doctor, was convinced from his own experience that hypothermia was a common problem. So we got foundation funding to measure the core temperatures of old people living at home (i.e., excluding the institutionalized).

One problem was that the *mouth* temperature was not relevant; we had to measure *core* temperatures. The normal way to do this is to take a rectal temperature reading. But the prospect of knocking on doors and saying, "Would you mind if I put a thermometer...", wasn't very promising. So some scientists developed a special plastic contraption which fitted over a lavatory seat with a thermometer in the sump, which measured the urine temperature. Urine temperature, unlike mouth temperature, is close to the core temperature — even when people are very cold.

We recruited and trained a special team of nurse interviewers. Refusal rates were amazingly low — about 10% — if I remember correctly. Using our device among a randomly selected sample of 2,000 people over 65,

on randomly selected days between January 1st and March 31st (in what turned out to be an unusually mild winter), we found that hypothermia was indeed widespread. Fully 10% of all old people living alone (roughly 800,000 people) any day that winter had a core temperature of 95.5 or lower.

These results transformed the political and medical debate. It changed from "Is this a problem?" to "How do we address it?" An immediate result was many local governments providing electric blankets for the elderly living in cold houses. Today, many more old people in Britain live in centrally heated homes. However, even though the problem has been acknowledged and partially addressed, it still has not been solved.

RICHARD MORIN, The Washington Post:

I'm delighted when a rigorously conducted survey pulls down the pants of conventional wisdom. Many polls, including too many of my own, merely *quantify the obvious*. That's why the occasional contrarian finding is so special, a nugget of pure gold flashing through muddy water from the bottom of the pan.

One survey project that, for me, continues to produce a disproportionately large share of such nuggets is the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, done by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The project design is grandiose: Beginning in 1968, the SRC has interviewed the heads of some 5,000 families nationally. They followed these families through births and deaths, divorces and remarriages, good times and bad.

The results have directly challenged deeply held notions about poverty. They challenge the notion that people's economic status, whether rich or poor, remains relatively unchanged over the course of their lives. They argue against prevailing notions of an

entrenched poverty class. They also document the tragically high price women and children pay for the breakup of a family. And they show that far more people than might be expected need a social safety net sometime in their lives.

A lay summary of the major findings was published five years ago by Michigan economics professor Gregory J. Duncan. That slim volume, *Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty*, remains my most frequently borrowed book. It has rescued me and more than a few colleagues here at the Post from the tyranny of conventional wisdom on a number of social policy issues.

ADAM CLYMER, The New York Times:

Polls can be important in many different ways. One way is to catch a vital moment in public opinion—such as a steep rise or fall in a president's public approval—or provide a depth of understanding around a known phenomenon—as explanations of women's views of political issues have helped define and explain the "gender gap."

The most important poll I have worked on did a bit of both. It was the "exit" poll of 15,201 voters leaving polling places on November 4, 1980. The easiest quick fix analysis of that election of a staunch conservative was that the nation had swung sharply to the right. Many people interpreted the election just that way. But the data didn't support it. I wrote in the next Sunday's Times that "a large share of the 43.2 million Americans who voted for Ronald Reagan appear to have been motivated more by dissatisfaction with President Carter than by any serious ideological commitment to the Republican's views."

Of course conservatives backed Mr. Reagan, as they had backed Gerald Ford. But he needed other votes to win. We gave voters a choice of reasons to check to explain their vote. Forty-two percent of Reagan's voters checked "It is time for a change" and

only 11 percent marked the box that said "He's a real conservative." We also posed issues. The combination that drew the most attention was a box marked "inflation and economy." The last week of the campaign had been marked by several sets of bad economic numbers, and Reagan beat Carter by two to one among respondents citing that combination. The most "ideological" issue on our list was "ERA/Abortion." Fewer than one voter in ten cited it, and that group split narrowly for Mr. Carter.

There were many ways in which this election was a defeat for Mr. Carter, the first incumbent to lose an election since Herbert Hoover. It was far less a case of Mr. Reagan's galvanizing and expanding the nation's conservatives than of Mr. Carter disappointing the moderates and the liberals. One telling statistic about the electorate was that 30 percent called themselves conservative, compared to 29 percent in CBS's 1976 exit poll. Reagan carried them 72 to 23 percent, with a handful for John B. Anderson and others. But Gerald Ford had carried conservatives 70 to 29 percent four years earlier.

This poll helped shape the understanding of the incoming Reagan Presidency, one that talked conservatively but drew its strength from the economy and how it would deal with it.

PHILIP MEYER, University of North Carolina:

It was a sweaty July Sunday evening in Detroit in 1967. The staff of the Detroit Free Press had wrapped up its spot coverage of the week-long riot and was planning the longer-ranging analysis to follow. The problem seemed insurmountable: using the tools of journalism to assess what had been going on in the minds of the rioters and their neighbors.

I was there on detached duty from the Washington bureau and fresh out of a Nieman fellowship at Harvard.

Perhaps, I suggested, we should reach beyond our conventional tools. The editors bought the idea.

Black interviewers were recruited through the Detroit Urban League. Through academic contacts, I reached Nathan Caplan and John Robinson at the Institute for Social Research in Ann Arbor. Robinson produced a sample of the riot area and Caplan helped me write the questionnaire and train interviewers. I supervised the field work, and in three weeks we produced a workable survey that laid to rest some of the journalistic myths about the riot: that it was the work of "riff-raff" at the bottom of the economic scale, or that it was executed by immigrants from the South who had been frustrated by the psychological burdens of assimilation in the industrial North. It was none of those things so much as an expression of rising aspirations. Detroit's irony was that, more than other urban areas, it had been a city of hope for blacks.

The survey became a factor in the Pulitzer Prize awarded the staff of the Free Press for its riot coverage. The Kerner Commission cited it as an exception to a pattern of poor media handling of race issues. And for the Knight-Ridder newspapers, it began a corporate tradition of experimentation in new and rigorous methods of journalistic investigation that is still emulated.

DAVID GERGEN, US News and World Report:

I thought I might approach the subject a little differently than you asked me to and write not about the *most important poll* but rather the *most important perspective on polling* that has been given me. For the latter I am pleased to give credit to Everett Ladd and his colleagues at the Roper Center. In the late 1970s, when Everett and the Center were extraordinarily helpful in the launch of Public Opinion magazine at the American Enterprise Institute, they kindly walked me through many a

minefield. I best remember a poll they showed me from France which asked, "Do you believe in the existence of God?" By a large majority, the respondents said no. Question two: "Do you believe that Jesus Christ was the living son of God?" By a large majority, the respondents said yes!

My friends at the Center taught me to read polls carefully — but also a touch skeptically. Of course, one can find in the polls a wealth of insight into the beliefs and social mores of a culture. Polls are one of the most important advances in our social sciences. I find trend lines about people's personal and economic well-being, their views of social questions such as race and women's rights, as well as their responses to politics and politicians, especially meaningful. At the same time, however, I have found that polling data about attitudes toward more abstruse issues, particularly in foreign policy, can be very slippery.

For example, the ABC-Washington Post polling team in the mid-1980s asked which of the following two countries belong to NATO: the Soviet Union or the United States. As the Post noted in its report, a flip of the coin would have recorded a 50% response for the US, but in fact, only 47% said that the US was a member of NATO. Similarly, as I recall, a poll taken by the CBS-New York Times pollsters years after the SALT talks had begun found that only 23% could identify the US and the Soviet Union as the two countries at the bargaining table. When one finds such a low level of understanding, polls that ask the public what stance the US should take in its policies toward the Soviet Union (e.g., on Lithuania) strike me as a virtually meaningless guide to foreign-policy making. That our politicians continue to let such polls heavily influence their decisions is distressing, to put it charitably. The politicians should spend a little less time sifting through the polls and more time talking with Everett Ladd and his Center colleagues.

STANLEY GREENBERG, Greenberg-Lake, The Analysis Group:

In early 1989, Greenberg-Lake was invited by the World Policy Institute in New York to conduct a survey of public opinion in El Salvador in anticipation of the first all party and presumably free elections since the outbreak of civil war. This was no conventional election and no conventional survey. Our goal was to conduct a credible poll that would constitute a check on possible abuses of the process, a reality test that would enable the press, outside observers, and democratic groups in El Salvador to judge what was happening on the ground. Since so much of the reporting on the election was about the electoral process itself, our survey was intended to elevate issues: what did ordinary Salvadorans want from a new, freely elected government?

It's possible to become cynical about the role of surveys in campaigns, but one particular meeting I had with representatives and participants in "popular organizations" highlighted the democratic thread in what we do: a roomful of peasants, nurses, and service workers, with all earnestness, helping this American pollster understand what concerns were important to real people. This survey helped advance the process of democratic change in El Salvador.

There was great interest in a "North American" survey, but this was not an environment particularly hospitable to such research. In the end, 45 percent of the respondents declined to answer for whom they would vote. The remaining results closely approximated the actual voting — placing ARENA in the lead, showing how vulnerable were the Christian Democrats and how narrow was the base of the Democratic Convergence.

But the findings on the electoral contest were much less important than what the survey showed about public sentiment on the issues facing the country. Respondents did not hesitate to speak their minds on these matters,

despite the violence that surrounded them. Salvador's people were disillusioned with the corruption of the Duarte government and anxious that someone save the country from the economic decline.

Above all, they wanted a government that would bring an end to the war. They wanted leaders who would negotiate with the FMLN. Our press conference on the survey findings produced a political storm: all the major parties denounced the results. Despite this, the Duarte government soon after reversed its position on participation in negotiations and even ARENA lowered its public resistance to the process — and all joined in preliminary discussions.

JEFFREY ALDERMAN, ABC News:

My favorite (if not the most important) poll is the one we did on Shere Hite's last book. Ms. Hite, you may recall, came out with a book saying that most women were miserably unhappy with their relationships and that upward of 80% of them were getting sex outside marriage. The book was getting a great deal of media attention, and we pollster-newsgatherers at ABC thought we'd try to duplicate her results using standard polling methodology.

Guess what? We found that most women were happy with their relationships and only a relative handful were having affairs. We couldn't duplicate any of Ms. Hite's findings — and said so on ABC's World News Tonight and in the Washington Post.

Ms. Hite didn't much care for our poll or the publicity that ensued. She got into several rather well-publicized squabbles with any talk show host who dared bring up the ABC poll. There was a week or so of hubbub about the whole matter.

That's when my gall bladder went rather seriously on the fritz. I

ended up recuperating from surgery in Roosevelt Hospital, and one of the first things I remember after the anesthesia wore off was the flickering TV apparition of the Phil Donahue show, with Shere Hite and her husband as the guests. This was one of the few times in my life when screaming seemed warranted. "Arrgh!!! Not Shere Hite again. Is there no peace for a sick man! Turn it off!"

But a visitor to the patient in the bed next to me asked if he could watch the show. Too weak to protest, I looked at the TV. Shere Hite's husband suddenly looked familiar to me, as though I had met him before in real life. I had. He was standing at the end of my bed transfixed by my TV — he was the visitor who had been so insistent about watching Donahue, so that he could see *himself*.

"You don't like the Hite findings?," he asked in a vaguely German accent. I gulped and identified myself as the author of the parallel survey. We both laughed at the coincidence. He even left behind some flowers for the room.