

What's the Biggest Hurdle for the Polls?

An Introduction by Everett Ladd

We asked nine senior survey practitioners to write short articles speaking to the question of what are the greatest challenges, or problems, now confronting public opinion research in the US. We expected answers at once candid and insightful, and as the following eight pages attest, we were not disappointed.

Every profession faces distinctive hurdles. Polling is no exception. And the high ones, or tough ones, are usually not narrow and technical but broad and conceptual. I'll admit I'm especially pleased our panelists share this understanding. Their assessments are clear and pointed, and they speak for themselves. I would only call attention to three of them.

Frank Newport of the Gallup Organization argues that public opinion research bears a burden other sciences don't: "Ivory Tower" researchers aren't the most important recipients of new findings; rather, "the public is intended to be the main audience." This fact imposes a huge responsibility on researchers in the field to give relatively unskilled users an accurate rendering—on the fly, if you will—of pretty slippery data.

Howard Schuman, professor emeritus in the field of public opinion at the University of Michigan, calls—correctly in my judgment—"validity" an especially daunting challenge for our field. It's not hard to ask questions and get answers that can be expressed quantitatively—as in "46 percent believe that...." But there's a real challenge, as Professor Schuman puts it, in "knowing what one has measured even if it is partly or even entirely different than intended, and also *understanding the limitations of one's measures*." Carve the latter in stone and put it over the main entrance to every survey organization and every news medium that uses polls. The aim must be, as Schuman writes, not simply to arrive at findings with some factual bases, but "to understand as well as possible what we have measured and how it can *best be interpreted in the larger world of which surveys are one abstracted part*." [I've added the emphasis.]

Murray Edelman, who is editorial director of VNS, reminds us in his piece that the survey industry needs "to shift the focus to the lesser-known area of non-sampling errors and, in particular, the bias from non-response." He notes that sampling error is the part of the sidewalk where the street light shines brightest, but that this doesn't mean it's the spot where we should be spending most of our time looking for what's missing. "We will make better comparisons of methods and

better use of data when the 'error' being used is the *total error* of the survey."

These and other challenges that confront opinion polling—in giving publics sound interpretation of survey findings, and in providing sound survey design—need greater sustained attention. But as we urge that the profession acknowledge more fully the barriers that stand in the way of providing real "validity" as Howard Schuman understands it, we should be careful not to saddle opinion research with criticisms it can't fairly be made to bear.

Through more than 30 years in the field I have tried to find this balance—that of one prepared to explore problems in no uncertain terms, but also in a measured and balanced manner. I regret that I violated this standard in my *Wall Street Journal* piece of November 19, 1996, "The Pollsters' Waterloo." In acknowledging this, I must stress that the fault is entirely mine; the newspaper did not push me to excess.

I could plead in self defense that many of the things I had in mind in my criticism were closely aligned to points argued in the articles that follow in this symposium. But rather than cover all this ground, let me simply state here that, however legitimate my objectives, I did not pursue them constructively. I apologize for a tone that, in places, was both unnecessary and ill-founded.

Further, while I continue to think that the abundance of poll findings showing Bill Clinton comfortably ahead of Bob Dole were not presented in a fashion that properly reflected the softness of much of the President's support and encouraged a view that the race was effectively over, and that the reach of "total error" in some of these findings was inadequately expressed, it is just not true that the final poll results were highly inaccurate. Any proper criticism of the role of the pre-election polls in 1996 must focus on how they, as publicly presented, framed the contest overall; the late poll findings were in fact sound.

The final error in my piece was entirely unintended, in my seeming suggestion that leading polling organizations were unwilling to describe and discuss their methods. These organizations are very forthcoming as to methods and in sharing their data. I meant in fact nothing more or less than what several participants in this symposium have expressed—that enabling users of poll data to appreciate the deep "validity problems" that can inhere to even the best research is difficult and requires continuing effort.