

The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...

point because there is no other widely accepted way to represent a large population in systematic terms.

Instead of endangering the viability of the “polling industry,” the issue of validity concerns the use and misuse of survey data in addressing serious scientific and policy questions. Experienced survey professionals know that poll results are shaped by subtle aspects of questioning, by the nature of interviewing, by sample bias as well as sampling error, and by many other factors typically ignored by the public and, more importantly, by those wishing to use survey data to their advantage.

For example, a recent commentary in *Slate* cites data purporting to show that “only 1% of whites would move if blacks became their next-door neighbors,” without any indication of the difficulties of interpreting such an absolute figure. Similarly, “factual data” often vary considerably for methodological rather than substantive reasons, especially (but not only) where inquiries concern illegal behaviors like drug use or require extrapolation from extremely small subsamples as in studies of wealth.

Part of the problem is the proclivity to report percentages

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as though they are absolute when we know that such results are subject to response effects of all kinds. But even where results are reported comparatively, as with trends over time or differences between subgroups, we all need to devote more effort to validation.

Such validation can take several quite different forms. One useful approach is to explore interpretations of questions through open-ended inquiries asking, for example, respondents to explain their answers more fully. Such efforts now go under the rubric of “cognitive interviewing” though they were often practiced by sophisticated pioneers of survey research like Hyman, Lazarsfeld, and Stouffer.

At the same time, survey results should be tested whenever practical against other systematic methods of data gathering, especially including behavior outside the self-reporting context of the survey. Thus, we need to know what actually happens in various situations when “blacks become... next-door neighbors” to whites, drawing as far as possible on guidelines from sampling theory. Still another approach to learning the meaning behind survey data is the split-sample experiment where specific features of questioning or inter-

viewing are varied with all else held relatively constant.

From a larger standpoint, validity sometimes calls for widening the focus of interpretation. Thus, if blacks often do not move into white neighborhoods because they fear rejection by “1%” of the neighbors, our survey questions should ask about it and our discussion of results should take it into account.

The point is not to test whether the original survey data are literally “valid” or “invalid,” for they can almost certainly be valid for some purposes as part of a national trend or in some other comparison. Rather, the aim is 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.

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Tempering Our Arrogance

By Kathleen A. Frankovic

Survey research faces many serious problems including declining response rates, maintaining confidentiality, and the confusion of pseudo-polls with legitimate survey research. Our greatest threat, however, is the hardest to fight—it’s our own arrogance! Even when we know our methods cannot produce precision, we allow those who read or use our results to think they do.

Ostensibly, the American public and media dislike polls: response rates are down and many people decry the manipulative possibilities in polls. Yet polls are also beloved: they have become institutionalized as the “best” source of information on public attitudes and opinions.

The 1994 Republican Contract With America was justified by reference to poll data; performance artists Komar and Malamid paint a picture they call “America’s Favorite Painting”; major news media, interest groups, and foundations promote their own polls; and, businesses base their marketing strategies on samples and focus groups.

Of course, the Contract With America research was mainly a test of question wording; “America’s Favorite Painting” tells more about the public’s trust in polls than its taste in art; and, campaign analysts make too much of changes in horserace percentages that are well within the range of sampling error, assuming a far more volatile public than probably exists.

However, what is more risky for survey practitioners are news reports studded with phrases like “polls say,” “polls indicate,” and “polls have shown,” even when those “polls”

could not *possibly* have yielded the claimed conclusions. Polls have become an “expert” voice in policy debates. Stuart Dodd almost predicted this situation 50 years ago when he was the director of the Washington State Public Opinion Laboratory:

“They—that great horde of people passing across the mountain in the dim distance—say. ‘They say’ proves things. Secondly, if it’s ‘in the numbers’ it proves things. Third, ‘I saw it in a book; I saw it in print’ proves things. Fourth, ‘it’s psychology’ that proves things. And unfortunately polling falls into all those four categories: ‘They say—it’s gossip—it’s what the man in the street says’; ‘It’s in numbers’; ‘It’s in print’; and, ‘It sounds psychological.’”

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Today, it’s “the polls” that say. Unfortunately, the power of polls in public debate comes not just from the fact that political and cultural figures rely on them. Polls today quantify the majority and thus make it more powerful.

Half a century ago in 1948, polling suffered its worst debacle perhaps in large part because its practitioners and consumers were so proud of their successes that they were unprepared for the prospect of failure. If we believe our own self-promotion today—that as “experts” we have developed precision instruments for measuring public opinion infallibly—we risk undermining our real accomplishments and weakening our profession’s well-deserved influence and respect.

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Publishing Honest, Independent Polls *By Humphrey Taylor*

The most important issue facing the polling industry is whether honest and independent polls are freely conducted and accurately published in the growing number of more or less democratic countries around the world. In many nations the so-called polls that are published are—in varying degrees—corrupted by governments, political parties, the media, and business interests.

In the closing weeks of the 1972 presidential election, I witnessed a bizarre attempt by the Nixon campaign to influence Harris Poll findings. Chuck Colson, a Nixon aide who later served time in prison because of Watergate, told us the peace negotiations with North Vietnam were at a critical stage. The North Vietnamese, he assured us, were following the polls closely. If they saw Nixon’s lead slipping, they would probably wait for the possibility of a McGovern victory. If Nixon maintained his lead, there was a good chance they would agree to peace terms before the election.

Tough pressure on a pollster. Fortunately, Nixon’s lead did hold up so we didn’t have to feel guilty for his failure to secure a peace treaty before the election. Unfortunately, attempts to manipulate and corrupt the polls are now a serious worldwide phenomenon.

The spread of democracy and free elections around the world has brought a new generation of political leaders to power who are learning a painful truth. What democracy giveth, it can also take away. Those who win by the ballot box can also lose by it. In short, freely-elected governments are often defeated in the next free election.

As a result, some of them are tempted to tilt the electoral playing field, to manipulate the press, to make elections less free and fair, and on occasion to stuff ballot boxes.

However, it is harder to steal elections when honest and accurate pre-election opinion polls and exit polls show someone else well ahead. One surprising and alarming trend is governments, politicians, business interests, and even the media using their influence in attempts to manipulate and suppress the publication of honest opinion polls in many countries.

To their surprise, many pollsters find themselves in an unexpected role as defenders of civil rights and bastions of democracy. This also puts honest pollsters at risk from those who want to corrupt the political process. Those who play along get rich; those who don’t may suffer. The pressures they face make Nixon’s attempts look like child’s play.

By way of example, consider Mexico. On a recent visit, I discussed this problem with several potential presidential candidates, senior members of the main political parties, a senator, two governors, pollsters, and two influential journalists. Most confirmed, and none denied, that each of the following occurred last year:

- Many polls quoted in the media were wildly inaccurate, either because the numbers were changed or because they were never actually conducted. Some clients will pay handsomely for these phoney polls.
- Honest, independent poll findings have been suppressed by