

## The Odd Origins Of Polling

"The First Straw: A Study of the Origins of Election Polls" by Tom W. Smith, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring 1990), Univ. of Chicago Press, 5801 S. Ellis, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

The origins of American political opinion polls are generally traced to 1936, when Alf Landon faced Franklin Roosevelt in one of the most lopsided "contests" in American history. Three pollsters (George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley) rose to the not-very-difficult task of predicting the winner. In fact, says Smith, a University of Chicago polling specialist, the real origins of the survey go back to the election of 1824, one of the closest in American history.

It was a time of great turmoil in American politics. The demise of the Federalist Party as a national force by 1820 had caused the collapse of the first American "party system." The reigning Democratic-Republican Party's "Virginia Dynasty" (Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe) was about to come to an end; Monroe would not run for a third term. In 1824, therefore, the nation faced its first seriously contested election to be decided largely by popular vote. (In 1800, only five of 16 states chose their delegates

to the Electoral College by popular vote; by 1824, 18 of 24 did so.) Finally, the old "undemocratic" system of nominating candidates for the White House by congressional caucus had fallen into disrepute. Yet no alternative had emerged.

Like their late 20th-century counterparts, the candidates of the 1820s began campaigning for the next election almost as soon as the last one was over. By 1824, the pack included such notables as General Andrew Jackson, Speaker of the House Henry Clay, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, and Secretary of the Treasury William Harris Crawford.

Under such chaotic conditions, old methods of gauging political sentiment—chiefly, consulting political "insiders"—no longer seemed adequate. Straw polls emerged as the best substitute. Apparently, Smith says, they grew out of the hybrid rally-conventions that political activists launched as substitutes for the old nominating caucuses. Before long, any public



"A Foot Race" was the title of this 1824 cartoon. Each figure in the crowd has a symbolic meaning: The man on the left with the stovepipe hat, for example, stands for the West.

gathering became fair game for a poll. In Pennsylvania, one political aficionado kept a record of how many toasts were made to each candidate at a Fourth of July celebration. Newspapers began reporting such results. By early October of 1824, the *Star and North Carolina Gazette* had collected poll results from 155 different meetings. Surprisingly, Smith says, the straw polls

rather accurately foretold local results.

The ultimate irony is that popular opinion finally counted for little in 1824. Jackson, the hero of New Orleans, won a plurality of the popular vote but fell short of a majority in the Electoral College. The election was decided by the House of Representatives, which chose John Quincy Adams to be the sixth U.S. president.

### *Budget Magic?*

"Line-Item Veto: Where Is Thy Sting?" by John R. Carter and David Schap, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Spring 1990), 1313 21st Ave. So., Ste. 809, Nashville, Tenn. 37212.

In politics, old panaceas don't die or fade away. They just keep hanging on.

Such is the case of the line-item veto. First employed by the Confederacy, the presidential line-item veto has been proposed in more than 150 bills introduced in Congress since 1876. President George Bush, like his predecessor, frequently proclaims it the nation's fiscal elixir.

The remarkable thing, as Carter and Schap, both economists at College of the Holy Cross, peevishly note, is that governors in 33 states already possess the line-item veto, and although scholars have sliced and diced the data from these states every which way, no signs of budget magic have been detected. As long ago as 1950, Frank W. Prescott reported that governors armed with line-item veto power rarely even used it, and during the early 1980s,

the average was two item-vetoes annually.

Perhaps in exasperation, Carter and Schap take the hunt for the elusive line-item-veto effect further afield. If it is worth anything, they speculate, the veto should enhance the authority of governors. And that would be reflected in other ways, such as better chances of reelection or elevation to the U.S. Senate. But statistical tests of these and four other indicators reveal no impact.

Theoretically, the authors say, the line-item veto may keep state expenditures down by forcing legislators to tailor proposals to avoid rejection. However, there is very little evidence that this happens. The line-item veto, they write, "need not cause, and apparently has not caused, the kind of sweeping changes either feared or favored by so many policy analysts."

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## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

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### *Soviet Gaullism?*

"Inventing the Soviet National Interest" by Stephen Sestanovich, in *The National Interest* (Summer 1990), 1112 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Meeting with his staff in July 1988, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze announced a revolutionary change in policy. Mikhail Gorbachev had just revealed his plan to create a new legislature and thus to begin the redistribution of power within the Soviet Union. Now, Shevardnadze said, Soviet foreign policy would be reoriented as well. Henceforth, it would be guided by a new concept, the "national interest."

What sounds mundane to Western ears was revolutionary in Moscow, says Sestanovich, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. For decades, Soviet leaders had used the "national interest" as a term of contempt; Soviet foreign policy was guided by the need to advance the international class struggle.

After he came to power in 1985, Gorbachev spoke of a new foreign policy