

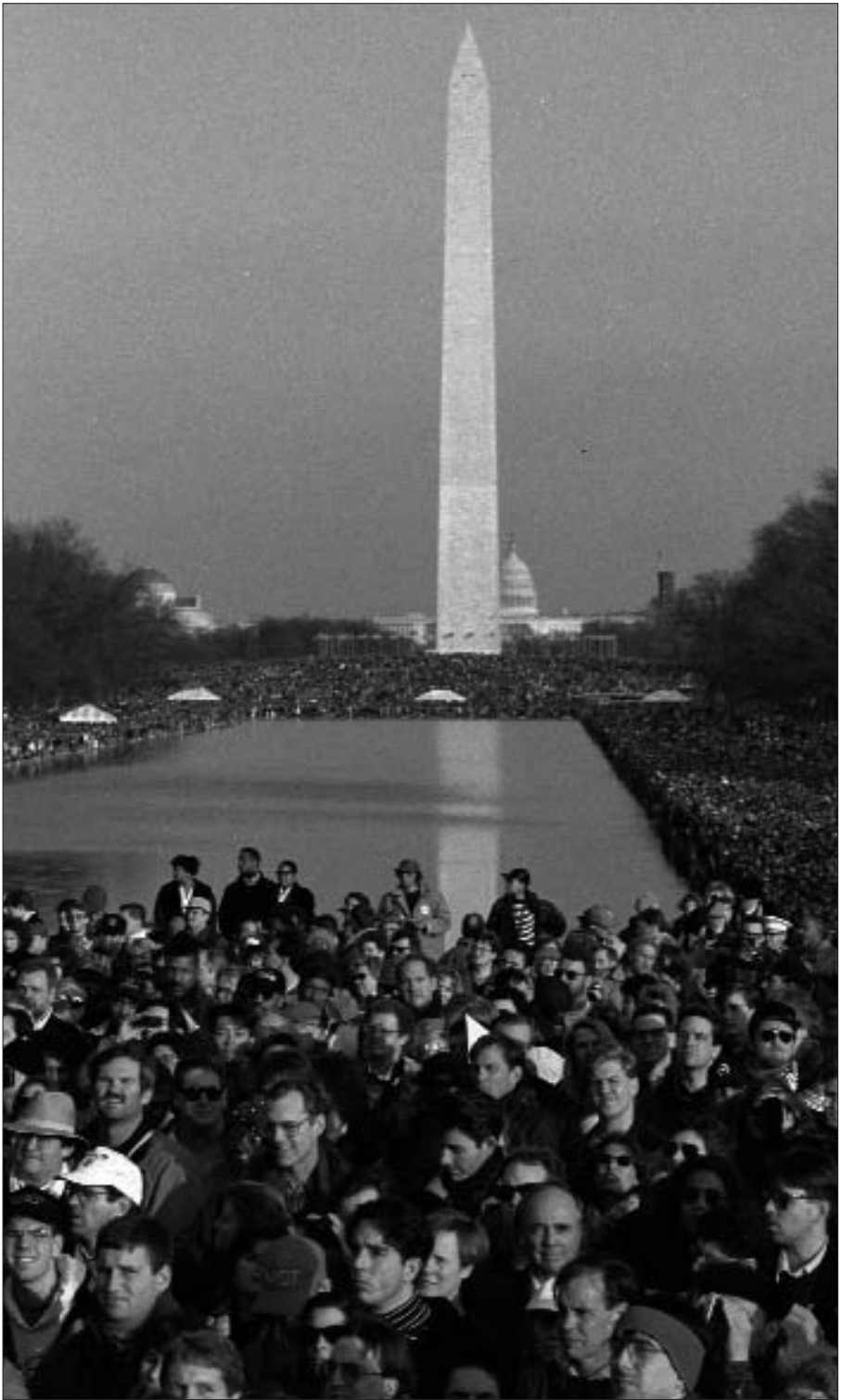
# Knowing the Public Mind

by Karlyn Bowman

In their 1940 book *The Pulse of Democracy*, George Gallup and Saul Rae defended a new instrument, the public opinion poll, but they cautioned as well that polling, an industry then just out of its “swaddling clothes,” would need to be evaluated afresh in the future. The infant industry, long since matured, is full of life today. Polls are a commonplace of American life, conducted almost nonstop on almost every conceivable subject. But some of the same questions Gallup and Rae asked about polling six decades ago are still being asked: Is public opinion unreliable as a guide in politics? Are samples truly representative? What are polling’s implications for the processes of democracy? And along with the old questions, there are significant new ones, too: Is the proliferation of polls, for example, seriously devaluing the polling enterprise?

The amount of polling on a subject much in the news of late may suggest an affirmative answer to that last question. In late July, the Gallup Organization asked Americans for their views on embryonic stem-cell research, a matter that has vexed scholars, biologists, and theologians. From August 3 to August 5, Gallup polled Americans again. On August 9, immediately after President George W. Bush announced his decision to provide limited federal funding for the research, the survey organization was in the field once more with an instant poll to gauge reaction. From August 10 to August 12, Gallup interviewers polled yet again. Gallup wasn’t the only polling organization to explore Americans’ views on this complex issue. Ten other pollsters, working with news organizations or academic institutions, conducted polls, too. Hoping to influence the debate and the president’s decision, advocacy groups commissioned polls of their own. The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International, a supporter of stem-cell research, reported that a solid majority of Americans were in favor of federal funding, and touted the findings in newspaper advertisements shortly before the president spoke. The National Council of Catholic Bishops, an organization opposed to stem-cell research, released survey findings that showed how the wording of questions on stem-cell research can affect a poll’s results.

So much polling activity on a single issue isn’t unusual anymore, and it clearly indicates how powerful a force polls have become today. Fourteen national pollsters release data publicly on a regular basis, as do



*Can pollsters really see into these minds?*

scores of others at the state and local level. Many of these organizations also poll for private clients, though much of that work never becomes public; market research on new products and consumer preferences (conducted privately for the most part) dwarfs the public side of the business. In the political life of the nation, campaign and public pollsters, particularly

those associated with media organizations, have enormous influence, and they are the focus of this essay.

The Roper Center, at the University of Connecticut, collects and archives polling data for most of the national survey organizations that release their data publicly. The Roper archive, the oldest and largest devoted to public opinion data, contains about 9,000 questions from the 1960s—and more than 150,000 questions from the 1990s. Nine organizations regularly contributed to the Roper archive in the 1960s. Today, 104 do. Materials from Gallup and Harris, two of the most familiar names in the survey business, represented slightly more than 75 percent of the Roper Center's holdings in the 1960s; in the 1990s, they accounted for less than 25 percent. There were 16 questions asked about Medicare in 1965, the year that legislation became law, and more than 1,400 questions about the Clinton health care plan in 1994, the year that proposed legislation died. From 1961 to 1974, pollsters asked some 1,400 questions about Vietnam; in the eight months from August 1990 to March 1991, they asked 800 questions about the Persian Gulf War. A combined total of 400 questions were asked about the 10 first ladies from Eleanor Roosevelt through Barbara Bush; twice that many questions were asked about First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton alone.

The polling business has grown dramatically outside the United States as well. Five firms polled for major British newspapers and television stations in the last days of the British election campaign this past June. About a dozen different news organizations, including three from the United States, conducted polls during the 2000 Mexican presidential campaign. The presence of independent pollsters surveying voters on election day in Mexico, and the expeditious broadcast of their findings, reinforced the belief that the election, which was won by the challenger, Vicente Fox, was fair. The *New Yorker* recently chronicled the work of a political pollster in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. In the past three Mongolian national elections, the pollster “predicted the winner within fewer than 2.8 percentage points.” The article described how one of the pollster's young associates traveled by motorbike, in a remote province with no roads, to speak to prospective Mongolian voters. When he handed out his questionnaires, the nomads began weeping because, as the young man said, “for the first time they feel that somebody cares about what they think.”

**P**olls in the United States have achieved a degree of prominence in public life that was inconceivable when George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, and Elmo Roper started using scientific sampling techniques almost seven decades ago to gauge Americans' opinions. Some of the most familiar polling questions today (“What is the most important problem facing the United States?”; “Do you approve or disapprove of how the president is handling his job?”; “In politics, do you consider yourself a Democrat or a Republican?”) were asked for the first time

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by those pollsters—the founding fathers—in the 1930s. All three measured Franklin Roosevelt’s popularity and predicted his victory in 1936. Roosevelt himself became an enthusiast for polls after they predicted his win, and he enlisted Hadley Cantril of Princeton University to measure opinion about issues that concerned him, particularly views about the war in Europe. Cantril used Gallup’s facilities at first, but he later set up an independent operation that provided secret poll reports to the White House. Harry Truman, not surprisingly, became skeptical about polls after their famously incorrect prediction that Thomas E. Dewey would defeat him in 1948. Most observers date the modern era of political polling to Louis Harris’s work for John F. Kennedy in 1960. Since then, pollsters working privately for political candidates have become so influential that virtually no candidate runs for major office without hiring one.

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Private polling is used in almost every aspect of political campaigns today—from strategic planning to message development to fund-raising—and at every stage of campaigns. And the activity doesn’t stop when the campaigning is over. In a post-election memo to Jimmy Carter in 1976, Patrick Caddell, the president-elect’s pollster, argued that politics and governing could not be separated. Thus was launched “the permanent campaign,” with its armies of pollsters and political consultants. Once in office, presidents continue to poll privately, and they collect data from the public pollsters as well. During the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, according to political scientists Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, “public opinion analysis became an integral part of the institution of the presidency,” with staff members given the task of monitoring the data. Successive administrations have become “veritable warehouses for public opinion data.” (The private polling that’s done for presidents and paid for by the political parties is lucrative indeed for pollsters—and often helps attract new clients.)

The public side of the polling business derives its great influence in part from media alliances and coverage. Since the earliest days of polling, pollsters who release data publicly have depended on news organizations to disseminate their findings. Gallup syndicated his polls in various newspapers; Crossley polled for Hearst, and Roper for *Fortune*. It wasn’t until 1967 that a news organization—CBS News—started conducting its own polls. CBS polled alone at first, but joined forces with the *New York Times* in 1975. (In the 1990s, CBS News and the *Times* asked Americans more than 10,000 questions.) Some of the other prominent partnerships today include Gallup, CNN, and *USA Today*; Harris Interactive, *Time*, and CNN; and Opinion Dynamics and Fox News. ABC News polls both alone and with

the *Washington Post*. A bipartisan team led by Democrat Peter D. Hart and Republican Robert Teeter polls regularly for NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*. Princeton Survey Research Associates polls for Bloomberg News and, separately, for *Newsweek*. Zogby International, which recently conducted a poll for NBC, worked with Reuters during the 2000 campaign.

Like their counterparts that poll for candidates, pollsters associated with news organizations are involved in all phases of the permanent political campaign. Pollsters inquire about how the president-elect is handling his transition, and whether the outgoing president is making a graceful exit. In the first 100 days of the Kennedy administration, Gallup asked four questions about how the new president was handling his job. During the same period in Jimmy Carter's presidency, four national pollsters asked 14 job approval questions. In George W. Bush's first 100 days, 14 pollsters asked 44 such questions. The total is substantially higher if one includes questions about how the president has handled specific aspects of his job, such as the economy, the environment, or foreign policy. Americans have already been asked whom they will vote for in the presidential election and senatorial contests in 2004. All this activity is a mark of how successful the pollsters have become, but it has also given rise to criticism that the sheer volume of the activity may be diminishing the value of polls.

In the media/pollster partnerships, the needs of the media often trump those of the pollsters. The press has to work quickly, whereas good polling usually takes time. The competitive news environment has pollsters vying to provide the first reaction to a breaking news story. Kathleen Frankovic, director of surveys at CBS, reports that it took Gallup two weeks to tell the country who won the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates. In 1992, CBS had results within 15 minutes of the second presidential debate. Technological advances have made it possible to conduct interviews and to process responses faster and more inexpensively than in the past, but the advances don't necessarily make the practice wise. Instant polls such as those conducted after President Bush's speech on stem-cell research and Connie Chung's interview with congressman Gary Condit (D-Calif.) may satisfy a journalist's requirement for speed and timeliness (and perhaps even sensationalism), but they do not always satisfy a pollster's need for adequate samples. To understand just what the public is saying often takes time, and time is a luxury media organizations don't have.

**T**he media's preoccupation with speed caught up with the pollsters in spectacular fashion last year. Although their record of prediction in the 2000 national election was one of the best ever, the exit-poll consortium (the five networks and the Associated Press pool resources and conduct a joint poll of voters leaving selected precincts) was roundly criticized for its role in precipitous election-night calls. CNN's internal report on the election night fiasco argued that "television news organizations staged a collective drag race . . . recklessly endangering the electoral process, the political life of the nation and their own credibility." As the results of a national *Los Angeles Times* poll make clear, the public objects to the

practice of calling elections before voting has finished. Three-quarters of those surveyed told interviewers that the networks' practice of predicting the results in some parts of the country while citizens in other parts of the country are still casting ballots "is interfering with the voting process and the practice should be stopped." (Just 22 percent said that the results constitute "breaking news" and that the networks should be allowed to continue the practice.)

Because competition in the news business is so great, polls are being conducted and reported about many matters on which opinion isn't firm—or may not exist at all. Questions about a candidate's strength or a voter's intention, asked years before an election, are largely meaningless. In Gallup's first poll about the stem-cell controversy, taken in July 2001, only nine percent of those interviewed said they were following the debate about government funding "very closely," and 29 percent

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"somewhat closely." Sixty percent said they were following it "not too closely" or "not closely at all." Asked whether the government should fund this type of research, 57 percent of respondents said that they "didn't know enough to say." In the weeks that followed, Americans did not take a short course in molecular biology or theology. Yet many pollsters reported their views as if they had. Poll findings released by advocacy organizations—on issues from stem-cell research to missile defense—have become weapons in political battles, and the development may undermine polling generally if it causes people to believe that you can prove anything with a poll.

In his forthcoming book *Flattering the Leviathan*, political scientist Robert Weissberg levels a serious indictment at contemporary polling on policy issues. He argues that polls, as currently constructed, "measure the wishes and preferences of respondents, neither of which reflect the costs or risks associated with a policy," and he urges policy makers to ignore them. He takes two superficially popular ideas—that the government should provide money to hire more grade school teachers and that it should provide money to make day care more affordable and accessible—and subjects them to rigorous scrutiny through a poll of his own. Opinions about the ideas turn out to be far more complicated, and far more skeptical, than the initial positive responses suggested. Weissberg believes that "contemporary polls tell us almost nothing worthwhile about policy choices facing the nation." In his view, polls have an important place in the political life of the nation when they measure personal values and subjective opinions, but they subvert democracy when they purport to provide guidance on complicated policy debates.

Although the public displays no overt hostility to polls, fewer Americans are bothering to respond these days to the pollsters who phone

them. Rob Daves, of the Minnesota Poll, says that “nearly all researchers who have been in the profession longer than a decade or so agree that no matter what the measure, response rates to telephone surveys have been declining.” Harry O’Neill, a principal at Roper Starch Worldwide, calls the response-rate problem the “dirty little secret” of the business. Industry-sponsored studies from the 1980s reported refusal rates (defined as the proportion of people whom surveyors reached on the phone but who declined either to participate at all or to complete an interview) as ranging between 38 and 46 percent. Two studies done by the market research arm of Roper Starch Worldwide, in 1995 and 1997, each put the refusal rate at 58 percent. A 1997 study by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found statistically significant differences on five of 85 questions between those who participated in a five-day survey and those who responded in a more rigorous survey, conducted over eight weeks, that was designed to coax reluctant individuals into participating.

Much more research needs to be done on the seriousness of the response-rate problem, but it does seem to pose a major challenge to the business and might help to usher in new ways of polling. (Internet polling, for example, could be the wave of the future—if truly representative samples can be constructed.) Polling error may derive from other sources, too, including the construction of samples, the wording of questions, the order in which questions are asked, and interviewer and data-processing mistakes.

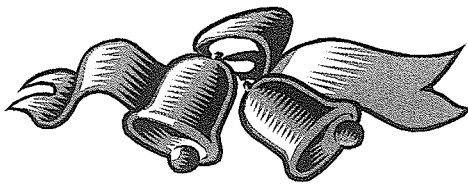
**T**he way many polls are conducted and reported today obscures some very important findings they have to offer about public opinion. Polls taken over long periods of time, for example, reveal a profound continuity about many of the core values that define American society. Huge majorities consistently tell pollsters that they believe in

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God and that religion is important in their daily lives. In 1939, 41 percent of those surveyed by Gallup answered “yes” when asked if they had attended church or synagogue in the past seven days. When Gallup asked the same question this year, an identical 41 percent answered “yes.” Americans’ views about the role of the United States in the world show a similar long-

term stability. In 1947, 68 percent of those surveyed told National Opinion Research Center interviewers that it would be best for the future of the United States if it played an active role in world affairs, and 25 percent said that it would be best for the country if it did not. When the question was asked 50 years later, 66 percent favored an active role and 28 per-

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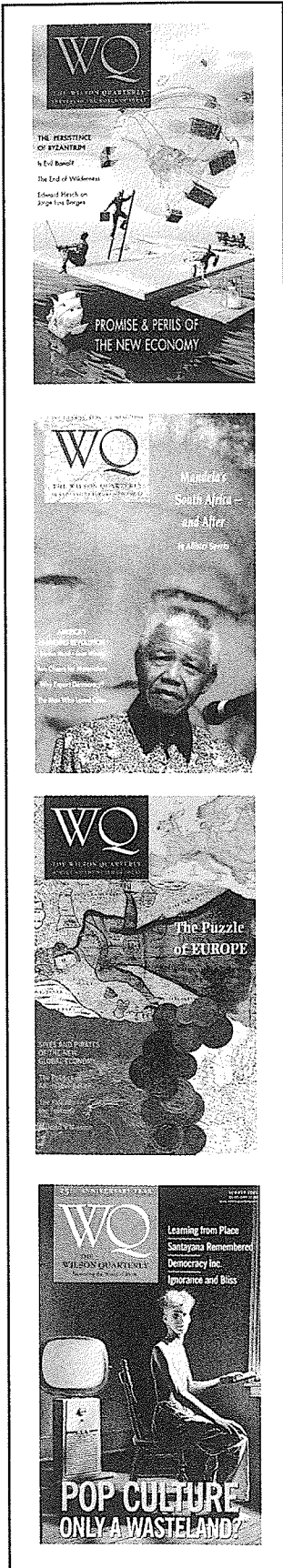
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cent were opposed. In dozens of iterations of the question, opinion hasn't budged. Americans are cranky at times about shouldering so many burdens abroad, but they are internationalists nonetheless.

There are other telling instances of stability. When Gallup asked in 1938 whether the government should be responsible for providing medical care to people unable to pay for it, 81 percent said "yes." When the question was repeated in 1991, 80 percent so responded. Polling on the minimum wage, too, shows consistent support for a wage floor beneath American workers. Many early observers of American democracy feared that public opinion would be too fickle and volatile to make democracy successful. But the polling data on many issues reveal a public strong and unyielding in its convictions.

Polls can also reveal how the nation has changed its mind. In 1958, only four percent of whites approved of marriage between "whites and colored people." Today, a solid majority of whites approve. In 1936, only 31 percent of respondents said they would be willing to vote for a woman for president, even if she were qualified in every respect. Today, more than 90 percent respond that they would vote for a woman. When Gallup asks people whether they would vote for a black, a Jew, or a homosexual, solid majorities answer affirmatively. (People are evenly divided about voting for an atheist for president, a finding that underscores the depth of Americans' religious convictions.) In 1955, Americans were divided about which they enjoyed more—time on the job or time off the job. Today, time away from work wins hands down. The work ethic is still strong, but Americans are taking leisure more seriously than they once did.

**P**olls show that Americans are of two minds on many matters, and that makes the findings difficult to interpret. Take the issue of abortion. When Americans are asked whether abortion is an act of murder, pluralities or majorities tell pollsters that it is. When they are asked whether the choice to have an abortion should be left to women and their doctors, large majorities answer that it should. Americans tell pollsters that they want government off the back of business—even as they also tell them that government should keep a sharp eye on business practices. The nation wants a strong and assertive military, but Americans are reluctant to send troops abroad. The "on the one hand/on the other hand" responses to many questions are a prominent feature of American public opinion, and the deep ambivalence seems unlikely to change.

It's essential in a democracy to know what citizens are thinking, and polls are a valuable resource for understanding a complex, heterogeneous public. Gallup and Rae had high hopes that polls would improve the machinery of democracy. But polls can be both overused and misused. Instead of oiling the machinery of democracy, the polls now seem to be clogging it up. In an article in this magazine in 1979, the editors wrote, "Americans today seem obsessed with their reflection in the polls." If contemporary refusal rates are a fair indication of their interest, that is no longer the case. Their former enthusiasm is now ennui. □