

Dueling Pollsters

“Assessing Poll Performance in the 2000 Campaign” by Michael W. Traugott, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Fall 2001), Annenberg Public Policy Center, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-6220.

Political prognosticators seemed to fare almost as badly as Al Gore in the protracted 2000 presidential election. Not only did red-faced TV network anchors have to retract their hasty projections on election night, but most national pollsters had to swallow their forecasts of a narrow victory in the popular vote for George W. Bush. Should the pollsters now don sackcloth and ashes? Not necessarily, argues Traugott, a professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan.

In the popular vote, Gore got a winning plurality of 48.4 percent, beating Bush by half a percentage point. Of the 19 final pre-election surveys of “likely voters” by different polling organizations, 14 gave the nod to Bush, while two had Gore with a small lead, and three (including two by the same firm, using different techniques) called the race a dead heat. That may not seem a great record, but the vast majority of all the polls accurately showed the contest for the popular vote to be very close. In fact, says Traugott, the 2000 surveys “were about as accurate as the average [of such polls] since 1956.”

As the 2000 election reminded us, however, the popular vote isn’t what matters most. In what may be a trend—one likely to be accelerated by the 2000 outcome—several polling firms collected state-by-state data to forecast the all-important Electoral College vote. (Not all of them surveyed all 50 states and the District of Columbia.) All told, they made 149

predictions and were wrong 17 times. Two of the pollsters, missing the final result in Florida, foresaw a narrow Gore win in the Electoral College. The third firm, which wrongly put eight states in Bush’s column, awarded him 354 electoral votes—83 more than he actually got.

Academics did worse than the commercial pollsters in predicting the winner of the 2000 election. Using historical models based on the state of the economy and presidential-approval ratings, political scientists confidently unveiled seven forecasts at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association in



August 2000. All seven anticipated a Gore victory, with the Democrat beating Bush in the popular vote by between 5.6 and 20.6 percentage points.

Did the professors’ models have a Democratic bias, or did Gore muffle an election that should have been his? It’s too close to call, as a pollster might say.

What, Me Worry?

“The Myth of the Vanishing Voter” by Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin, in *American Political Science Review* (Dec. 2001), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; “Just One Question” by David W. Moore, in *Public Perspective* (Jan.–Feb. 2002), The Roper Center, 341 Mansfield Rd., Unit 1164, Storrs, Conn. 06268.

On any list of national trends that have had academics and pundits wringing their hands, the decline in voter turnout and the (per-

haps related) loss of trust by Americans in their government must rank high. Yet, according to the authors of a pair of recent articles, the

two supposedly alarming trends are the veriest illusions.

Take the oft-reported decline in voter turnout since the 1960s, when more than 60 percent went to the polls in presidential election years. So low has the nation supposedly sunk in the intervening years that the 1996 election drew less than half of the American electorate to the voting booths.

But the widely reported “turnout rate” is not really the number of votes cast divided by the number of Americans eligible to vote, note political scientists McDonald, of the University of Illinois at Springfield, and Popkin, of the University of California, San Diego. The denominator researchers use instead (because it’s more readily available) is the Census Bureau’s calculation of the voting-age population. This figure includes noncitizens, felons, and others not eligible to vote, and excludes military personnel and other citizens overseas who are eligible.

Making use of government statistics on noncitizens and the other subgroups, McDonald and Popkin modify the voting-age population figures to produce a more accurate estimate of the electorate and its turnout. Their calculations show that turnout did indeed fall after 1960—from a 1960 level of 63.8 percent to 61.5 percent in 1968 and 56.2 percent in 1972. But since then, the number of ineligible noncitizens and felons has been increasing rapidly, and when that and other adjustments are made, the post-1972 numbers show no clear trend up or down.

The turnout for the 1996 election, by these new calculations, was *more* than half (52.6 percent) of the eligible electorate, and for the 2000 contest, 55.6 percent. In the 1992 election, 60.6 percent of the eligible electorate voted—a figure that should warm

the hearts of analysts who mourn a golden age they thought ended in 1960.

The alarmists still have the supposedly low level of trust in government to worry about (or at least they did before the September 11 terrorist attacks sent poll-measured trust in government surging to its highest level in decades). But Moore, senior editor of the Gallup Poll, says that even before the terrorist attacks there was no clear cause for concern.

There may have been a decline in “trust” over the years, he says, but it was unclear just what “trust” meant or how much of it there was. The level of trust varied widely with the wording of pollsters’ questions. The most often cited poll, conducted since 1958 by the University of Michigan’s National Election Studies, asked respondents if they could “trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?” In 1997, only 32 percent gave one of the first two responses. Yet that same year, Gallup got a very different answer with a slightly different question: It found that 62 percent had “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of “trust and confidence . . . in the executive branch,” and 54 percent did “in the legislative branch.”

Even if the levels of trust in government fell as low as alarmists believed, observes Moore, American democracy did not seem impaired. Citing a 1998 Pew Research Center report, he notes that in surveys conducted between 1987 and 1997, about 90 percent of Americans consistently said they were “very patriotic.” Other polls confirmed that. “If people remain committed to their country, even though they believe the government does what is right ‘only some of the time,’ what’s the problem?” asks Moore.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

The Winds of War

A Survey of Recent Articles

When an essay calling for the invasion of Iraq appears in the well modulated pages of *Foreign Affairs* (March–April

2002), the leading forum of America’s foreign policy establishment, it’s hard to see what’s left to debate. Especially when the essay is writ-