

PRESS & MEDIA

Poll Perversity

THE SOURCE: "Of Polls, Mountains: U.S. Journalists and Their Use of Election Surveys" by Thomas E. Patterson, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2005: No. 5.

WHEN THE NEWS MEDIA REPORT the results of public-opinion polls during presidential campaigns, they rush to explain the latest ups and downs in terms of the flaws and strengths of the candidates. That may seem natural, says Thomas E. Patterson, a professor of government and the press at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, but in reality it's peculiar. Why not look for explanations in the voting public itself?

The focus on candidates and their campaigns "derives from the age-old definition of news as events," Patterson says. "Candidates' activities are events. Voters' attitudes are not. Although voters' partisan loyalties and policy preferences are the major influ-

ence on the vote, these influences are complex and not easily analyzed or reported. Moreover, because these influences are relatively stable, they are poorly suited to journalists' need to say something new each day."

When news reporters explain poll results, they tend to say unfavorable things about a faltering candidate and favorable things about a surging one.

When a candidate is doing well or poorly in the polls, reporters have relatively free rein to explain why, and "the temptation to say unfavorable things about a faltering candidate," and favorable things about a surging one, is hard to resist. "When

George H. W. Bush languished in the polls during the 1988 campaign, reporters said it was because he looked weak. *Newsweek* ran a Bush cover story entitled 'Fighting the Wimp Factor.' However, when Bush took the lead in polls after the GOP national convention, *Newsweek* declared that Bush had 'banished . . . the wimp factor.'" No doubt Bush's convention performance helped, but anybody who studied the polls more closely would have seen that the surge in his support came mainly from Republican-leaning voters who simply hadn't been paying much attention to the campaign before.

By using the polls to focus so intensely on politicians as poll-minded strategists, and then pinning "flimsy, poll-derived images" on them, the press not only misses the bigger story of the underlying forces at work in elections, says Patterson. It also adds needlessly and destructively to Americans' disenchantment with the presidential candidates who would lead them.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Fuel for Fantasy

THE SOURCE: "Angels and Engines: The Culture of Apocalypse" by Marina Warner, in *Raritan*, Fall 2005.

IN THE AGE OF MASS MEDIA, THE Book of Revelation is reaching far beyond the church pulpit. Revelation's lush numerology and colorful charac-

ters—consider the Whore of Babylon astride a scarlet beast, or the famed Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—prompted George Bernard Shaw to dismiss the book as "a curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly admitted to the canon under the title of Revelation." But Revelation's

ridiculers can no longer "mock it out of meaning," writes Marina Warner, professor of literature, film, and theater studies at the University of Essex, England, for the visions and violence that drive this final book of the Bible are tailored for a culture in which the line between reality and fantasy has blurred.

Revelation's symbolic violence—its rivers of blood, mass slaughter, and bodies eaten and torn limb from limb—invites us to dissociate atrocity and its flesh-and-blood consequences. In part, this is because that