
Pseudo-polling is incarnate in the person of Frank Luntz. His best-known achievement was gaining widespread acceptance of his 1994 claim that at least 60% of those he polled favored every item of Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." True or false? Nobody knows for sure because Luntz refused to release his data. He won subsequent distinction as a televised manipulator of focus groups. Luntz rates a scarlet letter of his very own, for giving a completely new meaning to the L-word.

Samuelson had a point when he noted the importance of appearing fair-minded as well as acting fair-minded. When pollsters become opinion-mongers, why should the public give their analyses and predictions more credence than it gives the client-serving pronouncements of other flacks?

Pollsters acting as spokespeople for partisan clients must be willing to keep their "data" in the closet, a key element of Luntzery. The clients presumably get the straight stuff, if there is any. The public gets the partisan commentary and, perhaps, data manufactured to justify the commentary.

By going public as advocates while keeping their data private, advocate-pollsters make it harder for respondents to distinguish polls that are legitimate from those that are counterfeit. Over time, Gresham's law comes into play. Like debased currency, poll data will lose acceptance as it loses credibility. ●

Bernard Roshco is a past editor of Public Opinion Quarterly, and he directed the Office of Opinion Analysis at the US Department of State.

To the Editor

National Conceit

"Suppose a... soldier were captured during war and held outdoors in an 8-foot by 8-foot cell, and when traveling from one location to another was blindfolded and had his hands bound. Would you consider that to be acceptable or unacceptable treatment?"

This question was asked twice in a recent poll, once regarding an American and once regarding a Taliban soldier [March/April *Public Perspective*]. Forty-six percent responded "unacceptable" for an American soldier, but only 20% did so for a Taliban soldier.

It is worth noting that the question did not specify that the cell was outdoors in a warm climate with protection from rain; also, that it carefully specified "soldier captured during war," to indicate prisoner-of-war status, not terrorist or criminal, a point that not all respondents may have clearly understood and considered in their response. Some may have associated "Taliban" with "terrorist."

But even allowing for these factors, the result is disturbing. It demonstrates that many Americans still like to think of their enemies as inferior human beings, rather than merely different, dangerous, and perhaps distasteful. It recalls the depiction of Germans as ferocious apes in World War I, and similar media treatment of the Japanese in World War II.

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Have an opinion? Perhaps a reply to something appearing in Public Perspective? Direct submissions to the editor at pubper@ropercenter.uconn.edu. Submissions should be no more than 750 words. Authors will be contacted prior to publication.

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Correction

On page 24 of the March/April issue of *Public Perspective*, the responses to a Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates question were reported incorrectly. The question asked whether the government should move welfare recipients into jobs as quickly as possible, even if the jobs offered little opportunity for advancement, or whether they should be helped to develop skills for jobs where they would be able to advance. The results should have been 19% for "Move people into jobs quickly," 77% for "Find jobs where they can advance," and 4% for don't know or refused. The same error occurred in the Roper Center's iPOLL database and has been corrected.