The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...

The evolving body of scientific knowledge can ultimately ignore research that doesn’t meet scientific standards, even if it has already been published and disseminated to the public. But there is a key factor which differentiates public opinion research from other sciences: the public is intended to be its main audience. The power of public opinion polling to illuminate the attitudes and behaviors of the citizens of a democracy is one of its primary virtues. This reliance on survey results to help guide the ship of state necessitates that polls be trustworthy and reliable when they are first published.

The burden of accomplishing this goal lies both on the survey research industry and media. In coordination with media gatekeepers, more mechanisms can hopefully be developed to discourage the use and dissemination of polls that don’t meet high standards. There should also be more review by journalists before publishing survey results; asking such questions as how the findings compare to other poll results on the same topic, how was this poll done, and what criteria can be used to evaluate it? If journalists can’t take on this burden, they should make use of a peer review process before results are reported to the public.

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Interpreting Poll Results Better

By Howard Schuman

Validity is the largest continuing challenge for survey research. By validity I do not mean the usual definition of measuring what one intends to measure. A better definition is knowing what one has measured even if it is partly or even entirely different than intended, and also understanding the limitations of one’s measures.

Validity is primarily a problem for survey professionals and scholars rather than for the survey industry as such. The industry seems to thrive regardless of the validity of the reported data. The power of the sample survey method is so great, so fully accepted, and so difficult to replace by any other method that even the most egregious blunders committed in its name have little or no effect on its further use. From the fiasco of the Truman-Dewey poll forecasts through the latest embarrassing mispredictions, nothing has stood in the way of ever-increasing calls for survey results. Indeed, the most vociferous critics of polls typically end up doing polls themselves at some
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point because there is no other widely accepted way to repre-
sent a large population in systematic terms.

Instead of endangering the viability of the “polling indus-
try,” the issue of validity concerns the use and misuse of survey
data in addressing serious scientific and policy questions.
Experienced survey professionals know that poll results are
shaped by subtle aspects of questioning, by the nature of
interviewing, by sample bias as well as sampling error, and by
many other factors typically ignored by the public and, more
importantly, by those wishing to use survey data to their
advantage.

For example, a recent commentary in Slate cites data
purporting to show that “only 1% of whites would move if
blacks became their next-door neighbors,” without any indica-
tion of the difficulties of interpreting such an absolute figure.
Similarly, “factual data” often vary considerably for method-
ological rather than substantive reasons, especially (but not
only) where inquiries concern illegal behaviors like drug use
or require extrapolation from extremely small subsamples as in
studies of wealth.

Part of the problem is the proclivity to report percentages
viewing are varied with all else held relatively constant.

From a larger standpoint, validity sometimes calls for
widening the focus of interpretation. Thus, if blacks often do
not move into white neighborhoods because they fear rejection
by “1%” of the neighbors, our survey questions should ask
about it and our discussion of results should take it into
account.

The point is not to test whether the original survey data are
literally “valid” or “invalid,” for they can almost certainly be
valid for some purposes as part of a national trend or in some
other comparison. Rather, the aim is to understand as well as
possible what we have measured and how it can best be
interpreted in the larger world of which surveys are one
abstracted part.

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Tempering Our Arrogance

By Kathleen A. Frankovic

Survey research faces many serious problems including
deteriorating response rates, maintaining confidentiality, and
the confusion of pseudo-polls with legitimate survey research.
Our greatest threat, however, is the hardest to fight—it’s our
own arrogance! Even when we know our methods cannot
produce precision, we allow those who read or use our results
to think they do.

Ostensibly, the American public and media dislike polls:
response rates are down and many people decry the manipu-
lativeness of polling in polls. Yet polls are also beloved: they
have become institutionalized as the “best” source of informa-
tion on public attitudes and opinions.

The 1994 Republican Contract With America was justified
by reference to poll data; performance artists Komar and
Malamid paint a picture they call “America’s Favorite Pain-
ting”; major news media, interest groups, and foundations
promote their own polls; and, businesses base their marketing
strategies on samples and focus groups.

Of course, the Contract With America research was mainly
a test of question wording; “America’s Favorite Painting” tells
more about the public’s trust in polls than its taste in art; and,
campaign analysts make too much of changes in horserace
percentages that are well within the range of sampling error,
assuming a far more volatile public than probably exists.

However, what is more risky for survey practitioners are
news reports stuffed with phrases like “polls say,” “polls
indicate,” and “polls have shown,” even when those “polls”