

To the Editor

Commonalities

I am saddened that such fine scholars as Lawrence Bobo, Michael Dawson, and Devon Johnson frame the findings about black and white attitudes in ways that stress differences rather than commonalities [see the May/June issue]. Granted, this is a common feature in writing up polls and surveys. In the same issue, Sarah Dutton writes about an “underlying divide between white and black students”—because of a “nearly 20%” difference in their evaluations of race relations. Actually, the figures cited refer to 19% and 15% differences. Above all, focusing on them ignores the much larger percentages who took similar positions.

There is no obvious way to summarize the findings on numerous questions because one cannot assume all the attitudes have the same weight. Some included “don’t know” responses and others did not, and some provided respondents with two or more possible responses. However, it is obvious that most differences are much smaller than the commonalities, often less than 20%. If one takes out the issues that deal directly with race relations and focuses on issues such as the state and future of the nation, differences are even smaller.

It is one of the great merits of Bobo et al.’s study that it documents that differences are found, by and large, among one (or fewer) out of every five people queried. Other studies show that when we deal with other racial and ethnic groups, the differences are still smaller; many are cited in my book, *The Monochrome Society*. Most important, differences within each group are larger than among them, especially along class and educational lines. Why make for more divisiveness than is out there?

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Proliferating Polls

By Karlyn H. Bowman

A half century after the polling debacle in 1948 nearly destroyed the credibility of the adolescent survey research business, the industry is thriving, but the pollsters are facing credibility problems of a different kind. The number of polls has grown substantially, as has the volume of the pollsters’ activity.

Most major firms that publicly release data archive them at the Roper Center. The collection contains some 9,300 questions from the 1960s; during the 1990s, the archivists added over 130,000. In the 1960s, questions from Gallup and Harris made up slightly more than three-quarters of the collection; in the 1990s, their combined questions represented less than a quarter of the entries.

The surfeit of surveys is clearly evident in politics. By the time Iowans went to their caucuses in January 2000, for instance, pollsters had asked more than 1,000 questions about the presidential contest. But this number does not begin to tell the story of their activity. For some major media pollsters, the 2000 campaign began before the 1996 presidential election ended. One pollster asked people in 1995 what they would like to see Colin Powell do in the 2000 presidential contest if he declined to enter the 1996 one. In September and October 1996, three pollsters asked Americans whether they would vote for Jack Kemp or Al Gore “if the 2000 presidential election were held today.”

Although political coverage is one of the most visible parts of the survey business, polling activity has exploded in other areas as well. For the fourteen years between 1961 and 1974, the word Vietnam appears 1,397 times in Roper’s database. Compare this to the 800 questions asked about the Gulf War in the eight months from August 1990

through March 1991. Seventeen questions about Medicare are included for 1965, the year the legislation passed. In 1994, the year the Clinton health plan failed, 1,417 questions were asked about health care. Slightly more than 400 questions appear about all First Ladies from Eleanor Roosevelt through Barbara Bush. From 1992 through 1999, there are more than 1,300 questions about Hillary Clinton alone.

In this competitive polling environment, a premium is put on speed. According to CBS News polling director Kathleen Frankovic, two weeks elapsed before the Gallup poll reported reaction to the first Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate in 1960. The Associated Press had results within 24 hours of the 1976 debate. And in 1992, CBS News had results within 15 minutes of the second presidential debate. Changes in technology make this possible; they don’t make it sound practice.

With heightened competition, pollsters are asking questions about which opinion is nonexistent, or mushy at best. Complex questions on emissions trading permits and the Kyoto Protocol, in which pollsters describe the issue for respondents, virtually guarantee the results.

The media polls have also taken on a sensationalistic quality. In 1997, one pollster asked about a court-ordered examination of President Clinton’s genitals. Another asked twice whether Monica Lewinsky was a tramp. Some of the questions asked

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during John Ashcroft's confirmation battle resembled push polling, whereby ideas are planted in people's minds, only to be confirmed by the supposedly neutral poll.

On the plus side, proliferation has provided a much needed injection of new blood into the business. While asking questions the way that Gallup, Harris and Roper have posed them for decades is invaluable, new firms with fresh approaches have transformed our understanding of important issues. Take gun control. In the past most pollsters asked people whether they favored additional regulations on guns, and most said they did. But when new pollsters started asking whether we need new gun laws or whether the country needs to do a better job of enforcing existing laws, people opted for more enforcement, thus changing the political complexion of the issue.

Some criticism of the polls today is as old as the business itself, but that does not diminish its significance. In January 1936, the editors of *Fortune* magazine noted that "The season for the pre-election counting of political noses opened early last fall with more [straw] polls than can be conveniently kept track of and more conflicting results than can be reconciled by anything other than the old cliché, 'you can prove anything with figures.'"

As for the pollsters advancing the campaign calendar, a year before the 1936 election Gallup asked people whether they had voted for Roosevelt in 1932 and whether they would vote for him again. *Fortune* editorialized that the "spirit of prophecy" was not upon them when they set out with Elmo Roper to explore attitudes toward Roosevelt. Nevertheless, the magazine later touted, in a practice that continues today, the accuracy of its pre-election prediction. Although the results were a source of institutional satisfaction, the editors thundered that "rightness or wrongness

in the quadrennial game of forecasting elections should not be regarded as something tremendous in itself—partly because it would not be healthy that the game should become endowed with exaggerated importance, partly because it is not really a primary function of journalism."

Today, the game has become endowed with exaggerated importance. Although there is little evidence of hostility to polls, high refusal rates may be a rough verdict on them. Public attitudes are, as the *Fortune* editors said in introducing their poll over 60 years ago, "the raw material" of politics. If pollsters permit the competitive pressures of the media business to drive the survey business, the credibility of polls will suffer, and so, too, will the deeper understanding polls can provide of the nation's rich and complex political life. ●

Karlyn Bowman is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. This essay is adapted from The Permanent Campaign and Its Future, American Enterprise Institute-Brookings Press, October 2000.



Changing of the Guard

A transition has occurred in the editorship of *Public Perspective*. David Wilber Martel has moved on to a new career in the University of Connecticut's Office of University Communications. It is with considerable pleasure and confidence that we at the Roper Center welcome Lisa Ferraro Parmelee as the new editor.

In collaboration with Lisa, David led a remarkable transformation in the magazine. It is editorially, graphically, and stylistically a better magazine than it was before David initiated these changes. We fully expect the evolution of the magazine to continue under Lisa's leadership.

All of the staff of the Roper Center and our Board of Directors, Contributing Editors, and Editorial Advisory Committee extend our thanks to David for a job well done.

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