

Younger People Today Are More Positive About Polls Than Their Elders

by Alec Gallup and David W. Moore

Over a half-century ago, toward the end of the first decade of “scientific” polling, Eric Goldman reported the results of the first public opinion poll about public opinion polls ever conducted. In the inchoate discussion among contemporary scholars and practitioners regarding the potential role of survey research in a democracy, Goldman argued that “basic to any such discussion” is a knowledge of what the public itself thinks about polls.¹ And what he found in that benchmark poll on polls was generally positive for this new enterprise.

The 1944 study found that barely half (56%) of Americans had ever heard of polls (before being polled themselves for the study) and just 9% regularly followed the results of polls. However, among those who had heard of polls prior to their participation, 73% thought they were a “good thing” for the country while only 6% thought they were a “bad thing.” Confidence in the accuracy of survey research was also quite positive. Among those who had heard of polls, over half (57%) felt polls were right “most of the time” in predicting elections, compared with 21% who felt polls were not very good, and another 22% who expressed no opinion. Similarly, 52% said surveys were mostly right in their measurement of public opinion on non-election matters, while just 12% disagreed, and 36% were unsure.

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Problems of Measurement

In the ensuing decades, several surveys included questions about polls,² but inevitably there was—and still is—a methodological limitation to such efforts. The limitation is the result of at least two factors: 1) the errors caused by non-response, and 2) the participation of the respondents in the very activity they are asked to evaluate.

The non-response errors are easy to imagine, especially those that are due to actual refusals of potential respondents, since those who refuse are almost assuredly less positive toward polls than those who do participate. Some people may refuse because they don’t have time, and such a refusal may not necessarily reflect unfavorably on polling. However, others no doubt refuse because they dislike polling itself. It is impossible to assess exactly how much more negative the refusers are toward polls than the participants, which leaves at best some indirect assessment of how much any poll overestimates the public’s positive reaction to survey research.

Even among those who do participate in a survey, there are methodological limitations because participation in a poll is likely to influence a person’s evaluation of opinion research in general—a direct reflection of the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty. One of the major complaints we have heard over the years, for example, and an almost certain complaint on any call-in radio or television program where we have presented polling information, is the plaintive question, “*How come no one ever calls me?*” A Gallup poll in 1975 and another this year show that less than three in ten Americans have ever participated in a public opinion survey “such as this.” Thus, negative feelings about polls, due to the fact that one has never been called, are potentially widespread. However, once a person is participating in such a poll, that complaint about never having been called is, presumably, no longer a cause for negative feelings about polls. Hence, the very act of participation in the survey may relieve some of the criticism about the validity of survey research in general. And, of course, 100% of all respondents have participated (or are participating) in a poll when the evaluation of polls is made, compared to less than 30% of the rest of adult Americans — which means that for the very topic of the survey, the respondents are no longer representative of the larger population to which the results will be generalized.

In addition, even apart from the argument above, respondents involved in a poll are more likely to be positive about opinion research during the poll than when they are not involved in the interviewing process itself. Respondents tend to give responses that they feel will please interviewers, or that are consistent with what is socially desirable. And thus while they are talking to the interviewers, respondents are likely to mute whatever criticisms of polls they might really have.

The net consequence of these limitations is that the raw frequencies obtained in a poll on polls will inevitably overestimate the positive reaction of the public to survey research, and by a margin that cannot be measured precisely.

This limitation does not mean, however, that the data do not provide some useful insights into public opinion on polls. While we may not be able to say for certain what level of support for polls actually exists at any given point in time, we can reasonably assume that the changes in survey results over time are valid measures of the real trends in public opinion on the matter.

Experience as a Respondent

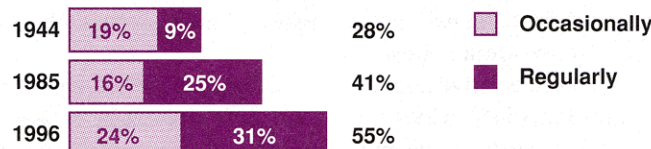
In October, 1965, at the 30th Anniversary of George Gallup’s founding of the American Institute for Public Opinion (AIPO), just 12% of the respondents in a Gallup poll indicated they had previously been questioned “in a public opinion survey such as this.” A decade later, the same question about participating in a poll elicited an affirmative response from 15% of the respondents, and 21 years later, in April of this

Thus, overall, it is difficult to determine how many more people today have participated in a “public opinion” poll than had done so several decades ago. A part of the problem is the confusion between public opinion polls and telemarketing, as well as other so-called polls whose real purposes are to sell products, raise money, or just spread the bad word about political candidates. We can certainly devise a question that would more carefully distinguish between public opinion polls and these other activities. However, comparing the results (based on different wording) makes the trend analysis problematic.

Interest in Polls Rising

A 1985 Gallup survey found that the number of those who regularly or occasionally followed public opinion polls in the news had climbed to 41% from 28% in 1944. The April 1996

Figure 1
More Americans are Paying Attention to Polls Now than Ever Before
Question: Do you follow the results of any public opinion poll regularly in any newspaper or magazine?



Source: 1944 survey conducted by Hadley Cantril; 1985 and 1996 surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization, latest that of April 25-28, 1996.

year, the number had climbed to only 18%. But then in a July poll of this year, the same question that had been used in the previous surveys produced 29% of respondents who indicated they had previously been polled, an eleven-point jump in three months compared with a six-point increase over 31 years.

The relatively steep increase between April and July suggests that the poll-participation question may be sensitive to where the question is in the survey—and thus how respondents interpret what a poll “such as this” actually is. In April, the question followed a presidential approval rating, one question on the presidential horse race, and 27 items where people were asked if they would vote for or against each proposal. Thus, they may have thought of that poll as primarily a political poll. In the July survey, the poll-participation question was asked at the end of a 15-minute survey, which included numerous political questions, plus questions on crime, gun ownership, abortion, alcohol, race, and personal sleeping habits. Perhaps the longer and more varied questionnaire in July gave the respondents many more reference points by which to judge whether they had ever been questioned in a poll “such as this”—leading to a higher number of affirmative responses. When the Roper Organization asked a different poll-participation question in 1985, but did not indicate a poll “such as this,” more than half (57%) indicated that “aside from this interview,” they had been interviewed “in a poll—either in person or by telephone.”³

Gallup survey shows that in the past decade there has been another increase in the number who pay attention to polls, up 14 points to 55%. The eastern part of the country reports the highest number of poll watchers—two-thirds of the public (68%), compared with just about half of the public in the rest of the country: 49% in the midwest, 52% in the south, and 53% in the west.

Polls — Good for the Nation

In the 1975 Gallup survey, people were asked how well-off the nation would be if its leaders followed “the views of the public” more closely. The question did not mention the word “polls,” and by a four-to-one margin, respondents said the country would be better off (67%) rather than worse off (16%). The April 1996 survey shows that an even larger majority believes the country would be better off (80%), with only 11% saying worse off.

Unlike the poll in 1975, in the April poll Gallup asked the

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The Polling Business

above question of just half the sample, while the other half was asked how well off the nation would be if its leaders followed "the views of public opinion polls" more closely. Given the frequent criticisms of polls by political observers, we expected that this form of the question would elicit a far less positive response—but we were pleasantly surprised. Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) said the country would be better off if the nation's leaders would follow public opinion polls more closely—only seven points lower than the number obtained when people were asked about public opinion (and not polls). Furthermore, only 14% said the country would be worse off, just three percentage points higher than the result of the previous form of the question.⁴

Another question in the April survey found that 87% of the respondents feel polls are a "good thing" for the country, up from 76% in 1985, and 73% in 1944 (among those who had heard of polls).

A new question asked if most opinion polls "work for or against the best interests of the general public?" By better than a three-to-one margin, respondents said "for" (68%) rather than "against" (21%) the best interests. There is no national trend on this question, but a comparison by age groups shows that younger people (under 30) are much more positive about polls (83% to 13%) than are those 65 and older (54% to 29%). A similar pattern was found on the previous question, where 20% of the oldest group, but just 3% of the youngest group, said that polls are a bad thing.

Accuracy

Four years before the great polling debacle, when all polls erroneously predicted the election of Thomas Dewey over Harry Truman as president, almost six in ten respondents (57%) felt that the polls' predictions of election results were "pretty nearly right most of the time." Four decades later, that number had increased to 68%, but it slipped slightly to 65% in the April poll. Public confidence in the accuracy of polls on non-election matters, on the other hand, is significantly higher

now (64%) than a decade ago (55%), which was only slightly better than in 1944 (52%).

While positive evaluations of the accuracy of polls have increased, so have the negative evaluations, and almost at the same rate. For election polls, the number of respondents who said the record was "not very good" was 21% in 1944, 20% in 1985, and 27% in 1996. Similarly, the negative evaluation of non-election polls increased from 12% in 1944 to 21% in 1985, but then climbed only slightly in 1996, to 23%.

Representativeness of Small Samples

In 1985, the Roper Organization asked respondents if they thought that a sample of 1,500 or 2,000 people can accurately reflect the views of the nation's population, or if "it's not possible with so few people?"⁵ Despite the apparently positive views about polling accuracy expressed by these same respondents to other questions in that poll, just 28% said they thought it was possible to have such a small sample represent the whole country. In the most recent Gallup survey, that question was re-asked, and again, just 28% said they think it is possible to represent the country with such a small sample.

During the 1996 AAPOR conference where these results were first presented, it was (gently) pointed out that the question itself is biased because it characterizes the sample as one "with so few people." In July of this year, Gallup re-asked the same question of half the sample, while the other half was asked whether a sample of that size could accurately reflect the nation's population, *or not?* Surprisingly, the new form of the question elicited a positive response of only 38%, just ten points higher than the old version — which in this survey, as in the two previous ones, produced 28% who felt the samples were adequate. These results suggest that Americans are still largely unaware of the principles of sampling. Most may feel in general that polls are fairly accurate, but when confronted with the actual number of respondents that are used, they express skepticism. This raises the question: how many respondents do respondents think are actually being interviewed?

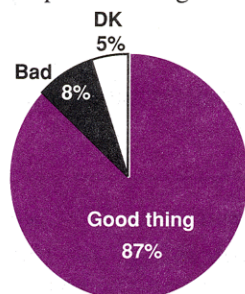
Frequency of Polls

A new question was asked in the 1996 Gallup survey which attempted to assess how upset people are with the number of polls reported in the news. About one in four (23%) said there are too many, while 48% said the number is about right, and 22% said there are not enough polls. Another 7% had no opinion. The most significant differences are found among age groups, with the youngest respondents much more positive about polls (being least likely to say there are too many and most likely to say there are not enough) and the oldest respondents (born in 1930 or earlier) much more negative about polls (the opposite pattern of the young).

Figure 2

Polls Get a Positive Review

Question: In general, would you say polls of the opinion of the public are a good thing or a bad thing in our country?

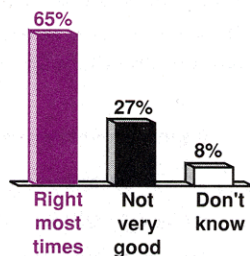


% Responding "Good Thing", By Age Group	
18-29 years old	93%
30-49 years old	91%
50-64 years old	88%
65+ years old	71%

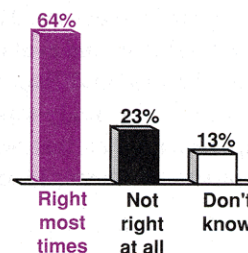
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, April 25-28, 1996.

Figure 3
Two Thirds Have Faith in the Accuracy of Surveys

Question: Some polling organizations make frequent predictions of election results. What is your general impression of how well they do—do you think they are pretty nearly right most of the time, or do you think their record is not very good?



Question: Do you think poll returns on matters not dealing with elections, but with public opinion toward such things as labor problems or international affairs, are usually pretty nearly right, or not right at all?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, April 25-28, 1996.

Conclusions

While we cannot say for certain how positive or negative people in general feel about polls, we can say that those who participate in polls generally give them a positive rating. More importantly, the trend is an upbeat one—with more respondents today than in previous years giving positive evaluations of the use of polls by political leaders and the contributions polls make to the country.

The trend in the evaluations of the accuracy of polls is mixed—more people today believe they are accurate, and more people also believe they are inaccurate. While the net trend has slightly favored the positive over the negative evaluation, the differences are so small as to be statistically insignificant.

Responses to the questions about the adequacy of a sample size of 1,500 respondents or more suggest that in the past decade Americans' understanding of the principles of sampling has not improved very much. In fact, many Americans hold apparently contradictory views: most say surveys are generally accurate, but then say that the samples on which they are based are too small to provide accurate results. That apparent contradiction may be due in part to ignorance of how large the samples actually are, but it seems unlikely that this is the entire answer. After all, sample sizes are routinely presented in the news. More than likely, a large number of people just don't think of the connection between sample size and the representativeness of the sample. For the most part, they accept the validity of polls because polls are widely reported in the news and widely accepted by the elite.

Finally, a persistent pattern is that younger people today are more positive about polls than their elders. The elderly are least positive. Those of middle age are in the middle. The pattern could be caused by a generational effect—each suc-

ceeding generation becoming more accepting of this complicated technology, or it could be due to a life-cycle effect—as people get older, they become more skeptical about the use of polls (and presumably other types of news events as well). Clearly, the first hypothesis is more attractive, if not necessarily more probable, than the second.

One last caveat about the findings in this report. Since the polls on polls measure only the opinion of those who are willing to be respondents, they no doubt suggest a much rosier picture than what is actually the case. Other unobtrusive and experimental methods are needed to supplement these studies.

Endnotes:

¹Eric F. Goldman, "Poll on the Polls," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 8 (1944-45), p. 461-467.

²Ellen M. Dran, "Polling on Polls: History and Issues," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, 1993.

³Burns W. Roper, "Evaluating Polls with Poll Data," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 50 (1986), p. 10-16.

⁴For another study that finds larger differences between people's evaluation of "public opinion polls" vs. "what the public thinks," see Ellen M. Dran and Anne Hildreth, "What the Public Thinks About How We Know What It Is Thinking," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1995), pp. 128-144.

⁵Burns W. Roper, p. 10.



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