What We've Done and How We've Done It: Six Decades of Gallup Polling

Editor's Note: The Roper Center is privileged to be the repository for Gallup opinion surveys covering the entire span from the mid-1930s to the present. In the 50 pages that follow, we bring together important Gallup survey findings—and some lighter ones, too—for each of the last six decades on six central topics: popular culture and styles; social issues; public policy; the economy; foreign affairs; and politics. First, though, before this extensive data review, we present interviews that David Moore recently conducted with Alec Gallup and with George Gallup, Jr.

Interviews with Alec Gallup and George Gallup, Jr.

By David W. Moore

In 1935, George Gallup launched what later came to be known as the Gallup Poll, releasing his first national polling results to newspaper subscribers under the rubric of *America Speaks* from the American Institute of Public Opinion. By then, his oldest son, Alec, was seven years old, and his second son, George, Jr., was five. Although the sons did not join the Gallup Poll on a full-time basis until they had completed college, both were closely involved with their father's enterprise from the time they could first count.

Because of the extensive experience and unique perspectives of these two second-generation pollsters, who have each made significant contributions to the profession in their own right, the editors of *Public Perspective* asked the Gallup brothers to briefly comment about the many changes both in polling methods and public opinion that have occurred in the last six decades, and their assessment of the polling enterprise.

Provided below is an interview I conducted with the Gallup brothers individually in early April 1997. Although initially the interviews began on similar topics, they quickly diverged into different areas, reflecting the special interests of each brother. Alec Gallup discussed his continuing involvement in the Gallup Poll and in the international expansion of the Gallup Organization, while George Gallup, Jr., concentrated on the George H. Gallup Institute, a separate non-profit entity founded in 1988 to address problems in education, environment, health, religion, and values.

An Interview with Alec Gallup

David Moore: What do you see as the major changes in polling in the past half century?

Alec Gallup: Probably the three most important are the change in sampling from quota to area probability, the change to telephones from face-to-face interviews, and, of course, the advent of computers, which has made data collection and analysis so much faster.

DM: For many pollsters today, it seems daunting to think of conducting national surveys without computers. How *did* you analyze the data in the early years of polling?

AG: We used keypunch cards and counter-sorters almost from the beginning. I think it was some time within the first three to four months that we got the counter-sorters; until then, of course, it was really tough—very time-consuming—counting all the results by hand.

DM: When did you start weighting the polling data by census figures?

AG: From the beginning. That was the problem with the *Literary Digest* poll—it got too many upscale voters and didn't know how to correct for them. We weren't going to make that mistake. Their sampling was bad too, but they wouldn't have been so wrong had they used any decent method of weighting

to insure proportionate representation. Our sampling wasn't so rigorous either in those days—although it *was* better than the *Digest's*—as we used quota sampling rather than the area probability sampling that we use today.

DM: Early in Gallup's history, split samples were frequently used, but then they seemed to drop off. Why were there initially so many?

AG: In the 1930s and '40s, we felt insecure about question wording. We were *very* sensitive to the fact that responses were greatly influenced by how the question was phrased. So, we'd ask the questions many different ways in different polls to find out what seemed most objective. Each interviewer would have two or three different forms of the questionnaire, all color coded, so that each form would be representative of the whole population.

By the 1950s, we felt more comfortable about question wording effects. We found that, yes, there would be some differences in results because of the wording, but not very large ones. And we felt we could design an objective question more easily. Also, we just didn't have as much time for the experiments as we had before. We started taking in commercial business in the '50s, piggy-backing client questions on the back of The Gallup Poll questionnaire.

DM: It would be remiss of me not to ask about the 1948 fiasco. Most historians point to the Dewey prediction in 1948 as a major disaster for the polling industry.

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AG: Some say it set market research back ten years. And it may very well have. But it didn't really hurt us—at least among Poll subscribers. We had about 130 to 140 subscribers before the election, and afterward we only lost a couple. It *did* kill off our movie business, though.

We had been doing movie research since 1937. David Ogilvy was with us then. We helped develop the titles, the casting, and even the story lines of many movies. Probably, the most successful movie ever for us was *The Best Years of Our Lives*, but we worked on many others as well.

Still, it was *always* controversial. The Hollywood "artists" were upset with us. They didn't like audience reaction research. They said story lines shouldn't be developed by polls! Casting decisions shouldn't be made by polls! These were *artistic* judgments! Well, after the 1948 election, the big "artists" had a field day and very quickly our movie business died. We had simply lost credibility. And we never really got back into the movie business until recently.

DM: Were there any other repercussions as a consequence of the 1948 election?

AG: Not so much "repercussions," but we did make some changes. In 1950, we switched from quota to area probability sampling, which many of the academic pollsters had been arguing for. However, the main problem with 1948 was that we simply quit polling too soon; it wasn't the sampling that caused the problem. But we didn't want to take chances, so we looked at all aspects of our polling—including sampling. In 1950, we also started our "likely voter" questions to separate out the respondents who would not turn out to vote. In the 1952 election, we were still gun-shy, and we must have had at least *four* different figures we used to hedge our bets! Actually, though, we did rather well that year.

DM: I remember reading that one reason commercial pollsters did not want to convert to area probability sampling was the cost.

AG: That's right, especially if you follow the requirement for call-backs. But we modified our use of that methodology. We made no call-backs, but we did weight by the "times-at-home" question to adjust for the fact that we did not make them. It was then that we started the systematic selection within the household, asking first for the youngest male and if not available then the oldest female. That method insured we would always get a respondent on the first visit. It was just too expensive to make several call-backs to the same house. And I don't think anyone, other than some of the academic pollsters, actually did so.

The "times-at-home" question asked the respondent how many times in the past week they were at home to "listen to the radio" or to "watch television." We used those questions so people wouldn't think we were trying to find out when they might not be home so we could rob them! Then, we would use that question to weight the responses and adjust for those who were rarely home. It was a pretty standard practice.

DM: Why did Gallup move to telephone interviewing later than most major polling firms?

AG: We gravitated to telephones quite late in part because we got ourselves caught in an odd trap. As more firms moved to telephone interviewing, we got more and more of the polling business that required exhibits be shown to the respondent. Sometimes our interviewers looked more like salesmen than pollsters! They would go into a household with advertise-

ments, balloons, all sorts of merchandise. Sometimes they had as many as 100 cards for respondents to look at. In-person interviewing was a lucrative business and therefore we didn't become very comfortable with telephone interviewing until later than other firms.

DM: Gallup's first presidential election polling conducted by telephone wasn't until 1988.

AG: We did some telephone interviewing before that, but we had 50 years of experience with in-person interviewing and were far more comfortable with that method than we were with telephone surveys. By 1988, though, the cost differential was just too great, and the telephone methodology had proven itself. Today, of course, we have 1000+ CATI stations around the country hooked into a common computer—quite a change in less than a decade.

DM: What are your major goals for the future?

AG: Today Gallup has affiliates in 24 countries, representing just over half the world's population—in part, of course, because of Gallup in China. We have affiliates in every major part of the globe except the Middle East and Africa. There used to be a "Gallup" network of around 45 countries, but it was very informal and the research organizations in those countries could follow whatever standards they chose. The affiliates we have today are with companies in which we have majority ownership so we can impose common standards. Eventually, we expect to have enough affiliates to poll in every country in the world where the government allows it. At that time, we will be able to conduct a poll that genuinely reflects world public opinion.

An Interview with George Gallup, Jr.

David Moore: What do you see as the major changes in polling in the past half century?

George Gallup, Jr.: There are the obvious ones like the change to telephones and the use of computers, but I think that another area is in explaining public opinion. We've lost the qualitative side of research. We always used to ask why people felt the way they did, and we would get anecdotes to help explain their views. But today I think we concentrate more on the numbers and have lost much of the flavor of public opinion. Also, I don't think we have done a good job of educating Americans about the nature of public opinion or on the ways of measuring it.

DM: You are involved in efforts to address that situation?

GG: Yes. I was chosen to head a new program started a number of years ago by the Marketing Research Association that has since been expanded to include several other major professional marketing and opinion research groups. The program is called "Your Opinion Counts," and it is targeted both to professionals and to the general public. It was initiated mostly because of declining response rates in survey research, partly caused by abuses of the research methodology. One objective is to educate professionals in the marketing and opinion research industry on the importance of consumer cooperation and on avoiding the methodology abuses that cause such cooperation to decline. The other objective is to help make the public more aware of how our research positively affects their lives so they will be more willing to participate in it.

DM: It's been nine years since the George H. Gallup Institute was founded in memory of your father. How do you assess its contribution to the goals you have mentioned?

GG: The Institute was established in 1988 as a non-profit, survey research organization, separate from the Gallup Organization that had just been acquired by Selection Research, Inc., in Lincoln, Nebraska. Both the people here in Princeton and the new owners of the Gallup Organization enthusiastically supported the establishment of this Institute, whose mission is "to discover, test and encourage application of new approaches to social problems." My father's continuing dream was to identify constructive ideas that would help humanity and then help leaders refine them in light of public opinion. He always felt that the public was ahead of most politicians anyway, and that public opinion research could be used to help enlighten our leaders. This Institute is devoted to carrying on that tradition.

DM: How do you see it as different from other public opinion research organizations?

GG: The Institute is an important new extension of the *role* of survey research, differing in approach from many other survey research organizations in a number of ways. It attempts to be *proactive* by seeking new areas and ideas to explore, rather than *reactive* by responding only to the needs and desires of clients. It emphasizes underlying long-term ideas rather than short-term issues, specializing in what my father called "response research." This type of research tests the public's response to a range of options or alternatives on a given proposal or plan. It then presents their responses in a way that not only informs but also energizes and inspires

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positive actions, which could include empowering local groups or organizations to carry out their own surveys. And, finally, the Institute gives attention to the whole person, including the spiritual side, so often ignored in assessments of public attitudes and behavior.

newsletter, called *YOUTHviews*, which reports on the findings of our monthly surveys. And, of course, we have done several special surveys, focusing just on the problems of the youth—on teen suicide, on teens and smoking, and attitudes of young people toward national service.

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DM: The Institute must have the most extensive polling data dealing with youth and the problems of youth of any organization in the country. How did that come about?

GG: It really began about 28 years ago when my father initiated the annual surveys for Phi Delta Kappa on education, which we still do today under the umbrella of the Institute. Also, about 20 years ago, in conjunction with Associated Press, we started a monthly survey of teenagers, which we still do, dealing with attitudes on all sorts of issues. About five years ago, we started the monthly

DM: Would you say the key to the Institute's approach to solving problems is this emphasis on the youth of America?

GG: Certainly young people are an important part of our focus because they represent the future. But our major concern is the development of new ideas to help solve social problems in the areas of education, environment, health, religion, and human values—areas which clearly involve young people but not exclusively so. And we are just as concerned with international as national attitudes. A couple of years ago we conducted a survey in 12 countries dealing with attitudes of parents, teachers, and students in primary schools. Previously, we conducted a survey in 24 countries on people's views of environmental problems. We also conducted a survey in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism to assess public attitudes toward written and spoken expression. So, our efforts have been quite broad.

DM: Do you see polling's future as mostly expanding to other countries or do you think new uses can be made of survey research?

GG: Polling is in its infancy—it's just getting started! It can be expanded not only to other countries but also to the community level to help find out what people are thinking and how they can be brought to work together. Quality of life surveys are very important at the local level so people can express what is really important to them. And I also think surveys can be used more than they have been to explore people's inner lives, to explore the meaning of religion in their lives, the meaning of prayer, and perhaps how wars might be prevented.

DM: Do you think that objective measures can be designed to measure such experiences cross-culturally?

GG: Definitely. We already do surveys cross-culturally on many different "external" experiences. I think we can devise measures that are useful for understanding people's "internal" experiences as well. And those, after all, are the most important for understanding and improving life on earth.

David W. Moore is vice president and Alec Gallup is co-chairman of the board, The Gallup Organization. George Gallup, Jr., is chairman, The George H. Gallup International Institute.