

Polling and the Media: The Roper/*Fortune* Collaboration Still Sets the Standard

By Everett C. Ladd

In their July 1935 issue, the editors of *Fortune* magazine announced “a New Technique In Journalism”—the public opinion survey. Though many businessmen had embraced “the revolutionary idea of taking a representative sample of public opinion to find out what consumers all over the country actually consumed and why,” newspaper and magazine folks had been exceedingly slow to see how the survey device could be adapted to their enterprise. “No publisher seems to have asked himself the question: ...if Mr. H. G. Weaver of General Motors can discover by a survey what trend in automobile design is most welcome to General Motors customers, why cannot the editor of a magazine ascertain by the same method the real state of public opinion on matters that vitally concern his readers?”

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Fortune had decided to make a major commitment to public opinion polling. The editors told of their plans to present on a regular basis “the results of independent surveys of national scope scientifically conducted by skilled men to determine the state of the public mind on matters of contemporary interest....” They had made Elmo Roper research director of the new “Surveys of Public Opinion;” his firm conducted the surveys from the outset. In their February 1942 issue, *Fortune’s* editors paid tribute to the work. “Not only has Mr. Roper been one of the first to create a technique for the scientific sampling of the public mind, but he has also contributed perhaps more than any other individual to the development of a rationale for this technique.... Today, thanks largely to the thinking of Mr. Roper, public-opinion research holds an important place among the social sciences.”

The Roper/*Fortune* collaboration continued for 14 fruitful years. It yielded some 80 national surveys of the general public, as well as special surveys of groups of interest to the magazine, notably business executives. These surveys were reported in a steady stream of *Fortune* articles. The first polling report ran to nearly 15,000 words and included 25 tables. Some later articles carried as many as 30 tables. To my knowledge, no other magazine of wide circulation has ever made such extensive and imaginative use of poll findings as *Fortune* made of Roper’s.

I’ve just finished my third review (the first coming some 20 years ago) of the fruits of the Roper/*Fortune* collaboration—the questions asked and the stories written. I have been struck again by the intellectual reach of the work. In a piece he wrote for the February 1942 issue (“So The Blind Shall Not Lead”), Elmo Roper discussed key elements of his polling philosophy. “I think,” he wrote, that “the emphasis in public-opinion research has been largely misplaced. I believe its first duty is to explore the

areas of public ignorance somewhat as we have tried to do in the Survey on labor published elsewhere in this issue. When we have determined in what areas, and among what groups, and upon what subjects, there is too little knowledge or understanding to support a reasonable opinion, then we know when it is proper for our elected representatives to set aside what purports to be a ‘majority opinion.’” But Roper was deeply committed to the democratic idea and confident in it. He went on to discuss “the second great function of public-opinion research: to report the opinions of the majorities on such matters as the public is, because of its knowledge, equipped to judge. For on such subjects the people have a sovereign right to be heard and be heeded by their representatives.” If it does its job in these areas, Roper concluded, “the technique of public-opinion research may be capable of being used to effect the greatest contribution to the democratic process since the secret ballot.”

We can’t begin to show the range of the findings of the 14-year Roper/*Fortune* partnership. We selected two areas that seem to us especially strong and interesting. The first area we review is the extensive polling done in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor on the role America should play in the war and how the public understood the stakes. The second is the Great Depression-era polling on economic issues: what governmental action, if any, should be taken to effect greater equality of income and wealth; government’s proper role in economic management; and assessments of the New Deal’s welfare (“relief”) programs. It’s great stuff.

