

could not *possibly* have yielded the claimed conclusions. Polls have become an “expert” voice in policy debates. Stuart Dodd almost predicted this situation 50 years ago when he was the director of the Washington State Public Opinion Laboratory:

“They—that great horde of people passing across the mountain in the dim distance—say. ‘They say’ proves things. Secondly, if it’s ‘in the numbers’ it proves things. Third, ‘I saw it in a book; I saw it in print’ proves things. Fourth, ‘it’s psychology’ that proves things. And unfortunately polling falls into all those four categories: ‘They say—it’s gossip—it’s what the man in the street says’; ‘It’s in numbers’; ‘It’s in print’; and, ‘It sounds psychological.’”

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Today, it’s “the polls” that say. Unfortunately, the power of polls in public debate comes not just from the fact that political and cultural figures rely on them. Polls today quantify the majority and thus make it more powerful.

Half a century ago in 1948, polling suffered its worst debacle perhaps in large part because its practitioners and consumers were so proud of their successes that they were unprepared for the prospect of failure. If we believe our own self-promotion today—that as “experts” we have developed precision instruments for measuring public opinion infallibly—we risk undermining our real accomplishments and weakening our profession’s well-deserved influence and respect.

*Kathleen A. Frankovic is
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Publishing Honest, Independent Polls *By Humphrey Taylor*

The most important issue facing the polling industry is whether honest and independent polls are freely conducted and accurately published in the growing number of more or less democratic countries around the world. In many nations the so-called polls that are published are—in varying degrees—corrupted by governments, political parties, the media, and business interests.

In the closing weeks of the 1972 presidential election, I witnessed a bizarre attempt by the Nixon campaign to influence Harris Poll findings. Chuck Colson, a Nixon aide who later served time in prison because of Watergate, told us the peace negotiations with North Vietnam were at a critical stage. The North Vietnamese, he assured us, were following the polls closely. If they saw Nixon’s lead slipping, they would probably wait for the possibility of a McGovern victory. If Nixon maintained his lead, there was a good chance they would agree to peace terms before the election.

Tough pressure on a pollster. Fortunately, Nixon’s lead did hold up so we didn’t have to feel guilty for his failure to secure a peace treaty before the election. Unfortunately, attempts to manipulate and corrupt the polls are now a serious worldwide phenomenon.

The spread of democracy and free elections around the world has brought a new generation of political leaders to power who are learning a painful truth. What democracy giveth, it can also take away. Those who win by the ballot box can also lose by it. In short, freely-elected governments are often defeated in the next free election.

As a result, some of them are tempted to tilt the electoral playing field, to manipulate the press, to make elections less free and fair, and on occasion to stuff ballot boxes.

However, it is harder to steal elections when honest and accurate pre-election opinion polls and exit polls show someone else well ahead. One surprising and alarming trend is governments, politicians, business interests, and even the media using their influence in attempts to manipulate and suppress the publication of honest opinion polls in many countries.

To their surprise, many pollsters find themselves in an unexpected role as defenders of civil rights and bastions of democracy. This also puts honest pollsters at risk from those who want to corrupt the political process. Those who play along get rich; those who don’t may suffer. The pressures they face make Nixon’s attempts look like child’s play.

By way of example, consider Mexico. On a recent visit, I discussed this problem with several potential presidential candidates, senior members of the main political parties, a senator, two governors, pollsters, and two influential journalists. Most confirmed, and none denied, that each of the following occurred last year:

- Many polls quoted in the media were wildly inaccurate, either because the numbers were changed or because they were never actually conducted. Some clients will pay handsomely for these phoney polls.
- Honest, independent poll findings have been suppressed by

The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...

the media because they displeased those with power.

- Polling firms not providing their clients with numbers they like (and are unwilling to alter the data) sometimes do not get paid.
- Contracts for multiple polls—for both the media and politicians—with reputable polling firms have been canceled because those with power did not like the early poll numbers and the polling firms would not change them.
- Some courageous media executives have suffered because they published accurate findings.

These scenarios are not hearsay; I have seen canceled contracts and polls that were suppressed.

These attempts to mislead the public with phoney polls and censorship of honest ones are not unique to Mexico. I have heard similar reports from many other countries, most recently from sources in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Ecuador.

In fairness, similar abuses have occurred in the United States and Europe. In a famous 1970s case, a French cabinet minister persuaded a leading French polling firm to reduce the percent of people reporting feelings of hostility toward immigrants. In 1994, Frank Luntz, a well-known Republican consultant, persuaded the American media to publish stories that his polls found 60% of the public supporting each element of the Contract With America. In June 1997, long after the election, it emerged that there were no such polls.

In Britain in the early 1970s, Labor Leader Harold Wilson was guilty of a mean-spirited intervention which affected me personally. My firm, which had recently been sold to Louis Harris and Associates, launched a regular poll jointly sponsored by a TV channel and a newspaper. Our ITN/*Times* (of London) Poll was a great success.

But Wilson was furious. How dare ITN, the news channel he trusted much more than the BBC, collaborate with *The Times*, then edited by William Rees-Mogg whose editorials supported the soon-to-follow departure of Roy Jenkins and the “Gang of Four” from Labour? Labour Member of Parliament Gerald Kaufman was sent by Wilson to persuade ITN’s management to stop the joint polls; they refused. Wilson then nobbled two ITN board members who persuaded the board to vote to end them. As a result, a high quality—and truly independent—regular poll was stopped.

In the United States, Canada, and Europe, there is less need for concern about the manipulation of election-related polls, but there should be much concern about “advocacy polls.” Trade associations, special interests, lobbying groups, and even individual companies frequently commission polls designed not to inform but to persuade. The questions are often

tailored to produce the answers clients want, and the replies are cherry-picked with only the most supportive data released.

For those who consider opinion polls to be a disagreeable newcomer to the political process, who believe they have a malign effect, or who see them as frivolous or insignificant, all this may not matter. The truth is polls now play an important part in the political process—or people would not try to manipulate them. Polls do influence political agendas, financial support for candidates, media coverage of issues and candidates, and congressional voting. A president or prime minister with high poll ratings can influence the legislature much more than a president with low ratings. Congressional members are avid poll readers.

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A worldwide review suggests that the frequent publication of independent polls, not controlled or influenced by the government or powerful interests, makes a valuable contribution to the democratic process. Where corrupt polls mislead, good independent polls inform.

Dictators, communist governments, and other authoritarian regimes have never allowed free independent political polls in their countries because the truth would be damaging. Most real democracies allow opinion polls complete freedom (although, to their shame, 30 countries including France and Italy have banned their publication during the closing weeks or days of campaigns).

In many countries like Mexico, which are becoming more democratic, those who see public support slipping away are sometimes willing to stuff ballot boxes or manipulate computers to steal elections and remain in power. It is much harder to do this when pre-election and exit polls show them in second or third place. Politicians who are fighting for their parties’ nomination want polls that show them ahead and are sometimes willing to pay handsomely for phoney polls which show this.

The main defense against the corruption of opinion polling lies with the media. If the local media can expose abuses, they can sharply reduce them. Unfortunately the media in some of these countries are subject to the same pressures from

those in power to publish phoney polls and suppress more accurate ones. Fortunately the international media, particularly the American media, can have considerable influence. Most governments and politicians care how the international media portray them. They want to be seen as democrats, not as corrupt officials clinging to power by manipulation and fraud. Local leaders and the media will repeat reports from leading US newspapers. Worth noting, it was a British, not a French, paper that exposed the manipulation of the polls in France.

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Achieving Quality Control in a New Pollsetting

By Lance Tarrance

Since the scientific measurement of public opinion gained general acceptance over 30 years ago and the industry grew into one of the more important parts of the US political economy, there have been many challenges to the industry. One that bears watching is how the industry has evolved into a "manufacturer-supplier" organizational structure, thus significantly departing from the first generation of private survey research companies. The term "full service research firm" needs redefinition and perhaps reexamination particularly from a quality-control standpoint.

Today we are seeing a new generation of pollster-strategists who not only ignore membership in the older, more traditional professional associations like AAPOR, but also use a network of "suppliers" for their sample construction, their field interviewing, and even their computer coding and processing. This departs from the first generation of survey research companies that believed in an integrated "in-house" organizational structure to control non-sampling errors and supervise quality control (although most large firms decentralized their phone banks more than a decade ago). In a word, the industry has moved from one that was largely "vertical" in operational theory to one today that is more "horizontal" or even "spoke-wheel" in management style. For example, a typical new generation research company has a small staff (five or less) but works with a client in Chicago, has a sample designed by a company in Connecticut, has the study fielded and collected by a firm in California, and has the data processed by still another company in Atlanta.

This new generation of researcher-strategists "farm out" to selected suppliers for a variety of sound economic and business reasons, but it is nonetheless a concern for the industry. In the past, most professional survey firms never used "outside" suppliers unless over-booked and time-constrained. This management notion to avoid subcontractors was well ingrained because it raised costs, delimited quality control, and unleashed security problems. Today, things have

certainly changed as low-overhead polling firms, usually "spin-offs" from larger companies, have emerged almost overnight to perform data analysis for clients from a network of trusted suppliers who may be located almost anywhere but at the company's place of business.

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This trend has its benefits and even may be just a logical part of the globalization of the technology revolution. Some of the advantages are lower initial risk or start-up capitalization costs, "marketplace" cost competition between niched suppliers, and self-acculturation of new technology in equipment and learning. In addition, these "new" pollsters perhaps can save time and thus extend their consulting, strategizing, and developing of new clients. On the other hand, there are dangers as well: less quality control management, more dependence on an outside network of unconnected suppliers, nonconformity of scientific standards, data security concerns, split field work, and less accountability for detecting and correcting non-sampling errors. And lastly, costs will most likely keep going up.

There is hope that this supplier model of management can work in the future. There appears to be more trusted technically-trained suppliers who are also spin-offs from larger companies, there is an acknowledged need for a designated "inside research director" with the technical skills to work with the various suppliers, and there are more people entering the labor force who have mid-level training in quantitative methods who can staff the supplier companies.

However, "farming out" research components to diverse suppliers needs evaluation by the industry and deserves more focus by the people who serve on standards committees.

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managing director, Burson Marsteller*

Looking for Answers in Less-Lighted Areas

By Murray Edelman

There is an old story of a woman observing two men on their hands and knees under a street light, looking carefully at the sidewalk. She asked what they were looking for and was told that a ring dropped in the dark area where she was standing. She responded: "If the ring dropped over here why are you looking over there under the street light?" One of the men answered: "Because there is more light over here."