

in Bush the Younger's job approval ratings over the past month. However, the Gallup poll showed virtually no change in that period, and the most recent Zogby survey showed a bump upward for Bush.

Safire yawns. "What's your question?"

"I haven't gotten to a question, yet." He reads:

The lesson: put not your faith in pollsters, especially when they offer their interviewees no alternative. Instead, measure your opinion of the president against those who may be running against him in a few short years. Here is the early-morning line handicapped by one right-wing tout...

Henny looks at Safire. "You're the tout, right?"

"Right. What's your question?"

"You got ten guys listed here. All senators."

"Eight senators. One congressman. And one ex-vice president. He lost, remember?"

"I put a lot of money on the ponies, in my time. But I never bet on one that wasn't running. Who are you asking me to bet on? I'm not sure I want you as my bookie."

"It's not a real bet."

"But you handicapped them against each other. How do you handicap horses, or guys, who aren't in the same race?"

"I'm just asking, who do you like better, President Bush or any of these guys?" Safire grabs the paper and reads:

Now you're ready for the Henny pollster's call. 'How's your candidate? Do you prefer Bush or one of the above?'

"I still don't get it. Bush is running the country, and the other guys are running around Congress, or someplace. They're

not on the same track. There's no race. What's the point of handicapping them?"

"The handicap is part of the gag."

"You mean you call it the 'Henny Poll' because it doesn't mean anything?"

"Of course it means something. It means this poll by the *Times* and CBS didn't mean anything."

"They asked about the president."

"They didn't compare him to anybody. It wasn't a fair test."

"Isn't this president big on testing kids?"

"Right."

"The kids get graded for what they do on a test?"

"Right."

"So, what's wrong with grading Bush for what he does to the country?"

"You don't get it, Henny. There's no comparison."

"If you say so, Bill. You got the column. But do me a favor? Don't call it the Henny Poll."

"What should I call it?"

"You're the language maven, Bill. If there's a name for it, you got it. But I still want to know who—whom—to bet on. How would *you* answer this question?"

"You still don't get it, Henny. When the answer is always the same, the question doesn't matter."

Henny fades out. Safire sleeps. ●

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To the Editor Polls and Democracy

Congratulations on the fine Kaiser/*Public Perspective* research on attitudes to, and the value of, polls [July/August issue]. Very important for all of us in the field. A great contribution.

In June I spent a week in Honduras (and had done the same thing a year earlier in Haiti) on a visit paid for and organized by the State Department, talking to audiences there about the value and importance of polls in emerging democracies, and the need to have honest, independent polls.

I met the president (who has his own in-house polling operation), leading candidates for the presidency and other political leaders, business leaders, media owners and journalists, and stressed the importance of honest polls in improving the democratic process, in letting the voices of the people be heard, and in making it much harder to steal elections.

Unfortunately, in many countries, there is a very strong belief in the bandwagon effect (in spite of evidence of its absence) which leads to the corruption, and manipulation, of many (most?) polls there. As one Honduran politician said to me, "Why would I pay for a poll if it doesn't show me ahead?" This is a huge problem because much of the media is owned by politicians or those very close to them.

The State Department says they may want me to pay visits to some other countries. So whatever others think about the polls, someone (other than politicians) in DC seems to value them!

Humphrey Taylor
Chairman, The Harris Poll