
To the Editor

Policing Pollsters

Professor Robert Weissberg has rightly criticized the unaccountability of American opinion pollsters [*Public Perspective*, May/June 2002]. While I do not deny what he says about the US, I do deny that it is anything but a local problem, not applicable in the other major democracies of the world. I base this on my own experience across the world in my capacity as secretary general of Gallup International till my retirement in 1994.

There are a variety of factors, in three groups, namely commercial, professional, and legal.

First, the commercial. My good friend Carlos Denton of CID Costa Rica carried out a political survey in Nicaragua at a sensitive time. He was much criticized, and I defended him. After this he said to me that 90% of his business was for strictly commercial clients, who wanted nothing but the truth, and would desert him if they felt he was amenable to pressure to bend or falsify. This is universally true. In the US this has led to a situation where reputable polling organizations will only poll for the media and leave polling for candidates or parties to those who are prepared to carry out advocacy types of work.

Now to the professional. After a national election in Britain, some disgruntled Labour members of our Parliament petitioned the European Parliament to introduce legal controls on opinion polls. Naturally, the European Society for Opinion and Market Research produced a working party, of which I was a member, to contest this. We were able to convince them that we had a Code of Conduct that covered the points they were concerned about, and furthermore that

we had a mechanism, already used, to police it effectively. No legal controls were introduced. I should also mention that the International Chamber of Commerce, well represented in the US, jointly backs all ESOMAR codes.

So in Europe, at least, market research is accepted, together with the law and the medical profession among others, as fit to act responsibly and to control itself.

Lastly, I come to the legal aspect. In Britain, at least, candidates for the national parliament are severely restricted in the expenditure they can make for their campaigns. It is not only their own expenditure that would be taken as campaign expenses, but any money spent by others that would be considered as intending to benefit their chances of winning; and they would lose the election if all this taken together exceeded the amount permitted. The unavoidable consequence is that there is no money available for advocacy polls to mislead the voters. This works.

In contrast, though it is extending my comments into a murkier area of American foreign policy, your successive governments see nothing wrong with injecting enormous sums of money into elections in Latin America to support right-wing regimes favored by the US, thereby going counter to the ideals of democracy as we see them in the UK.

Norman Webb

Past secretary general and honorary member, Gallup International

Have an opinion? Perhaps a reply to something appearing in Public Perspective? Direct submissions to the editor at pubper@ropercenter.uconn.edu. Submissions should be no more than 750 words. Authors will be contacted prior to publication.

To the Editor

Information Gaps

After a long vacation I finally got around to the May/June issue of *Public Perspective*, as usual very interesting. I was especially intrigued with the juxtaposition of the first two articles.

In "Hidden from Scrutiny," Robert Weissberg correctly notes that there is an "immense" contrast between electoral accountability and surveys. On the other hand, his claim that elections "perfectly illustrate a responsible 'voice of the people'" is questionable. They are, at least in the US, a perfect illustration of the voice of about half the people—those who bother to vote. One could assume that the non-voter simply doesn't care and can be safely ignored. That would be as fallacious as the common practice of ignoring non-response bias in surveys. In that respect, there is no "immense contrast" between elections and polls.

Mr. Weissberg notes that poll results are treated as "little more than curiosities in a war of words." In the same issue of *Public Perspective*, Bernard Roshco writes about "the *condottieri* of polling, the hired gunslingers who poll for candidates and parties." Obviously, their results are intended to be more than "curiosities."

All results, both of polling and of elections, are information, a broad term that encompasses misinformation and disinformation as well. Depending on the way the results are presented, elections and nonpartisan polls may provide misinformation; partisan polls provide disinformation.

*Thomas T. Semon
Englewood Cliffs, NJ*