

Present at the Creation

Helen Crossley, Burns W. Roper, and George H. Gallup, Jr. on the origins and development of opinion research

The Roper Center is pleased to present a discussion with Helen Crossley, Burns W. Roper, and George H. Gallup, Jr. The three are distinguished opinion researchers in their own right; their fathers—Archibald Crossley, Elmo Roper, and George H. Gallup, Sr.—founded modern public opinion research.

Public Perspective: Polling has had a long and storied past. Define for us an historical event that significantly changed the nature, image and/or credibility of polling.

Helen Crossley: There are three of us here and only two events that qualify. I will discuss the 1936 election forecasts with the assumption that at least one of the other speakers will mention the other event. With regard to the nature, image and credibility of polling—1936 impacted all three.

The 1936 predictions changed the nature of how polling was conducted from the massive mailings that the *Literary Digest* had been using to what were then called “scientific methods.” The Gallup Organization gets most of the credit for this change. The fact that George Gallup Sr. began public release of his survey data in an election year was a major event. However, the Roper and Crossley polls, which also started at that time, extended Gallup’s efforts and reinforced scientific polling considerably.

A little less clear than the effect on polling’s nature was the impact 1936 had on the image of polling, but without George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley polling’s image would have plummeted. In fact, it might have gone right under, given the prominence of the *Literary Digest*. Until 1936, the *Digest* had been correctly predicting election outcomes. But compounded methodological flaws resulted in failed forecasts for the *Digest* that year. [For more detail see *Public Perspective*, pp 50-54].

The “scientific polls” being conducted in 1936 rescued the credibility of polling and weakened support for the methods used by the *Literary Digest*.

Burns Roper: Indeed, 1936 was a defining event. The established polling organization, if you can call it that, was the *Literary Digest*. Along came three young upstarts and they together didn’t do anywhere near as many interviews as the *Digest*. Yet all three successfully projected the 1936 outcome where the *Literary Digest* failed. The fact that three different

organizations, all using samples a fraction of the two million used by the *Literary Digest*, accurately predicted the election, established the credibility of “scientific methods.” 1936 certainly changed the nature of polling from that point forward. When I began at the Roper Organization there were many skeptics who said “you can’t tell me what a country of 120 million people thinks with only 4,000 interviews.” 1936 showed you could.

The other event that I’d say was equally important was the mis-call by pollsters of the 1948 presidential election. This incorrect projection shook people who since 1936

had become unquestioning of survey findings: “If the polls say it, it’s got to be right.” The 1948 forecasts showed there was fallibility and put polling in proper perspective. 1948 didn’t change the nature of polling too much, although it did give a needed push to explore new sampling techniques. The picture of Truman holding up the “Dewey wins” edition of the *Chicago Tribune*—now there is an image not quickly forgotten.

George Gallup Jr.: My choice actually is neither 1948 nor 1936. Rather it has to do with the remarkable explosion of survey research abroad, which basically started before World War II. All the original questions that were asked about conducting surveys in the United States were asked about global polling. Would people tell the truth? Would people tell you what they really believe rather than just giving the answers that they think you want? Would people be willing to talk about private matters such as politics and religion? These were important substantive questions but sampling was also an issue. Would we be able to effectively sample countries in which there are many different dialects? Happily the answers to these questions are “yes,” and survey research has exploded around the globe.

One of the key factors in the success and acceptance of international survey research was performance in election surveys. If a polling operation is faulty in any basic way, it will show up in election predictions. Election surveys are the acid test of a poll’s methodology. Impressive accuracy in interna-

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Polling America

tional polling has been gained over the years, equaling what has been done in the US. With the cooperativeness of respondents we have been able to interview people from all over the world. Not only was the cooperative spirit of respondents essential, but also the overcoming of communication barriers, and these were considerable both in terms of language and culture.

The whole area of survey research abroad has grown at a most impressive rate. Gallup currently can cover about 90% of the surveyable world. From a technological point of view it's possible to gather global opinion in a matter of 24 hours. Virtually every area of life has been explored at least in some depth. And a remarkable level of accuracy has been achieved in sampling populations. Surveys have given the public a voice, thus contributing to government being more responsive to its citizens.

PP: Has the explosion of public opinion polling, both in the US and abroad, resulted in greater democracy? Is democracy being better served by the fact that we know much more today than we did four or five decades ago about what public opinion is?

Crossley: Yes. We are much better off "as is," if the alternative is no polling or government regulation. Of course, some excessive polling and some bad survey work are being done. But the cure is public education, rather than having someone decide what's good and what's bad and then doing away with the "bad."

Roper: As smart as our fathers were, they didn't have a lock on all the wisdom of the world. A bunch of good ideas, both in subject matter and technique, have come along because of the many different people in survey research. That is one reason I hope we don't get formalized and rigid in our structure—in our concept of what's a good poll and what's a bad poll. One of the examples I'm proudest of—a poll that no jury of pollsters would give good marks to with regard to the sampling, questionnaire technique, data processing or analysis,

but it helped elect John Chafee governor of Rhode Island. I don't want to just meet the standards and fail to do the job. More and more people are coming into polling with many new ideas. A lot of these ideas are bad, but overall this has a good effect.

Gallup: To echo the question, it's useful to think of what the country would be like without polling. We wouldn't have known the will of the public on Vietnam, and the public was essential to disengagement. We would assume that the vast majority of the American people are *dissatisfied* with the way things are going in their own lives. We would assume that the churched are more ethical than the unchurched and that's not the case. We would have no sense of social change, what the public's concerns are, the willingness to overcome these concerns. Without polls, we'd be groping in darkness and lose perspective.

The burden of achieving greater democracy through conducting and disseminating the results of polls doesn't fall on our leaders so much as it does on the polling profession. We can't do much about the leaders. We hope that they will lead and not simply follow public opinion, but it's our job to get public opinion across to them, in depth. Our leaders need to be aware of the limitations of our research, the basis of the information that we are producing, the trends, the intensity of feeling, the level of knowledge about a particular issue. All of that is vital. Unfortunately with cost considerations and the need to turn around findings quickly, we can't always do the detailed analysis that is necessary for leaders to consider in the decision-making process.

PP: We are headed into a new election season and one of the recurring criticisms the public opinion poll is likely to encounter involves the horse race question. Would you comment on the value, or lack thereof, of the horse race item? And more generally, what can survey firms do to influence better reporting of election polls in the mass media?

Crossley: Horse race polls are something that my father disliked and wanted to discontinue. 1948 was to be his last one but after the mis-call he had to do it in 1952—which he did successfully. The horse race needs to be taken with a lot of salt because it favors the candidates whose names are known and discourages newcomers. However, I do think the horse race may actually stimulate some public interest.

As to what survey organizations could do, concentrating on particular issues as much as possible and associating the issues with various candidates will help. Avoid "if an election were held today would it be Dole or Clinton"—that is what people get tired of.

Roper: My father also decried the horse race and planned that 1948 would be his last. It was a waste of time since we had proven that the tool was accurate, that sampling would work. Then 1948 happened so he had to do it again for the 1952 elections.

Many people will tell you the horse race is superficial, but nevertheless that's what lots of people want—including a number of those who say it is superficial. I do think that increasingly newspapers are providing more than just the election forecast, not just reporting the 19th horse race in the last three days by six different polling organizations. Now you get some interesting and thoughtful analysis. You can't avoid the horse race: The latest standings are what's sexy.

Gallup: The horse race questions are necessary—they provide a good performance measure for the poll's methodology. I don't see how we can avoid election forecasts because we have to

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keep retesting the mechanism. In that sense the horse race questions will have to continue. But I also agree with Bud: Surround horse race figures with more detailed analysis. What, for example, are the clusters of values held by different voting groups? Building around the horse race figures can provide a meaningful analysis that is not as open to criticism.

Roper: If a pollster came and said that s/he just did an analysis showing that people who go to church three times a week are 10 percentage points more for someone versus people who don't go to church at all, that's fascinating. But it just begs the basic question—who's ahead? If you provide those numbers then you can include some of these interesting findings, but you can't start with the second paragraph. You have to start with the first.

PP: A question that is regularly debated from a methodological perspective is the remedy for falling response rates to telephone surveys? What would you suggest to redress this problem?

Roper: Low response to telephone surveys is the main reason you will see a return to personal interviewing. Telephone surveys, and in particular mechanical ones—especially the press-a-button variety—are turning people off. These telephone push-button surveys are going to lower the cooperation rate to the point that you're not going to be able to get good measures of public opinion from telephone surveys.

Gallup: To improve telephone survey response rates, a higher degree of attention needs to be focused on the quality of the interviewer. Growing refusal is directly related to poor interviewing. Another consideration to increase cooperation is not going beyond a 15-minute

interview and saying that at the beginning of the interview. Also, being more selective of the topics you will cover in a survey is key to avoiding turnoffs.

Crossley: I agree with George that good interviewing helps increase completion rates. Remember that a completion rate of 60-80% can be compensated for by proper weighting. I don't see response rates getting much below that with good technique.

Roper: Yes, but it does mean that completion rate is important. If you are

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going to substitute willing people for unwilling people there may be other differences between them that weighting isn't going to correct. This is one of the reasons that I'm bothered by the generic polling-release statement that says “with a sample of this size it's subject to an error of plus or minus 3.2%.” It's not true because what is meant by this statement is that you can tell within 3.2% what the American public thinks. Actually, you can tell within 3.2% what the *cooperating* American public says and that's different. Thirty percent of the public doesn't cooperate. You don't know much about them.

PP: If you were looking over the next five to ten years, what development

would you most like to encourage in polling?

Crossley: More education for the public generally and for journalists specifically (as the National Council on Public Polls is doing). Perhaps feeding polling into the college-wide curriculum and maybe into high schools so that people become more knowledgeable users of polls. Education would allow us to ask more questions on the issues and then everybody would benefit.

Gallup: Education is a huge challenge. Currently, we are losing the fight in terms of encouraging young people to become more sophisticated about polling. Additionally, we need to become more proactive in survey research: looking for, and exploring, new ideas rather than simply dealing with what's hot.

Also, we need to do a better job of disseminating the results. We need to take the findings to the next step—not just let them end up in a research volume somewhere. More effort should be concentrated on pin-pointing survey findings creatively to new groups that can make use of the data.

Roper: Polling, as I have said a number of times, is as much art as science and I'd like to encourage the art side of it. I'd like to see people not look for what is the accepted way of doing this but to experiment. If you have another idea, try it. The word “research” implies trial and error. Recognizing this was one of the great strengths of our three fathers. They all came at survey research from different vantage points. None of them knew how to do it, they were all experimenting. That's one of the reasons survey research has developed so well.

