

# The Polls and the Election

By Everett C. Ladd

It would probably be a good thing for American democracy if we could learn to pay a little less attention to pre-election polling. After all, we are going to find out who wins on election day anyway. Until then, the really compelling question for all interested citizens isn't "Who *will* win?," but "Who *should* win?" It's evident, though, that the political community's and journalists' appetites for election polls are growing, and elections are increasingly framed in terms of trial heat results.

Pre-election polling was begun non-systematically by the *Literary Digest* magazine in the late 19th century—and then systematically by Gallup and Roper in the 1930s. Still, polling was but a tiny appendage of American electioneering through the 1960s. In 1968, the Roper Center's exhaustive catalog of presidential trial heats contains only ten askings of "How would you vote if the election were being held *today*?" from September 1 through election day. This year, in contrast, we have located more than 50 for the month of September alone and project a total in excess of 125 through November 5.

## Polling Implications of Weak Party Ties

As the number of polls climbs, many leading research organizations labor to improve their methods, trying, for one thing, to get better estimates of "likely voters." That means those in the entire eligible population who are likely to actually cast ballots. For all these efforts, the polling environment is more difficult now than ever before. One big reason why it's harder now than in the past to get reliable pre-election estimates of the vote is because a growing segment of the electorate is no longer anchored by party loyalties. The proportion of Americans who think of themselves as independents rather than as Democrats or Republicans and who, even more importantly, vote independently—vote the "best person" rather than the party, and split their tickets—is now the largest ever. (See pp. 47-54.) Because today's electorate is less anchored, it now typically takes less to move it.

In 1952, for example, when the National Election Studies (NES), conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies, first asked respondents whether they had always voted for the same party or had voted for different parties for president, 71 percent described themselves as party regulars. Last month when the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research asked this same question, just 37 percent nationally said they always voted for the same party for president (see p.48). There's been a steady drop-off over the last four decades. Another survey taken by the Roper Center in February found two-thirds of respondents saying they typically split their ballot rather than vote a straight party ticket in any given election.

These and many other displays of growing electoral independence are a natural by-product of broad social change. Today's electorate has had far more formal education than that of even three decades ago, and feels more confident about making its own vote choices, without party guidance. What's more, it derives its campaign information largely from mass media of communications that see themselves in something of an adversarial relationship with the parties and their candidates.

This weakening of party ties may not pose problems for the democratic process, but from a polling standpoint, the unanchored electorate is a harder read. It has the potential of moving from one presidential candidate to another on relatively little "provocation." Especially for that large segment of Americans who don't think much

about their choice of candidates until the approach of election day makes it necessary, the absence of firm party loyalties governing candidate choice creates a situation where answers to early trial heats often have very little substance.

## In Some Settings, Why Poll At All?

In this environment of weak party ties, some election settings may make the polling exercise virtually impossible. The prime case this year is the first round voting in Louisiana (September 21) to fill the US Senate seat being vacated by Bennett Johnson. Louisiana law provides for a first round of balloting in which candidates run without regard to party—a single "open primary." Then, the two candidates with the highest percentages meet in a runoff (assuming no one gets 50% in the first vote). This year in Louisiana more Republicans than Democrats entered the competition, and the two leading Democrats—former state treasurer and gubernatorial candidate, Mary Landrieu, and Attorney General Richard Ieyoub—had greater name recognition than any of the Republicans. As a result, every poll taken in the state through September 14 showed the Democrats running one, two, with the highest ranking Republican, State Representative Woody Jenkins, in third place. The polls suggested, then, a strong likelihood that the GOP might have no candidate in the election finale. The last pre-election poll (taken by Mason-Dixon) found Jenkins moving up to second place, but still trailing Landrieu (Figure 1).

In the actual Louisiana voting on September 21, however, Jenkins came in first. Though properly conducted, the pre-election polls actually provided misinformation—in that they suggested an election outcome that was always unlikely, if not impossible, based on other known conditions. It was highly unlikely that a state trending Republican as strongly as Louisiana is would put into the run-off two Democrats, neither of whom had broad and deep standing in the state's electorate.



Figure 1  
Polls Were An Especially Poor Guide to the Louisiana Senate Race

|          | 8/8-9 | 8/16-18 | 8/30-9/2 | 9/3-4 | 9/3-8 | 9/7-10 | 9/12-14 | 9/16-17 | 9/21/96 |
|----------|-------|---------|----------|-------|-------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| Landrieu | 28%   | 24%     | 33%      | 20%   | 27%   | 31%    | 23%     | 27%     | 21%     |
| Ieyoub   | 25%   | 24%     | 17%      | 15%   | 13%   | 21%    | 16%     | 14%     | 20%     |
| Jenkins  | 16%   | 9%      | 10%      | 8%    | 10%   | 8%     | 13%     | 18%     | 26%     |
| Duke     | 8%    | 6%      | 2%       | 6%    | 6%    | 7%     | 6%      | 7%      | 11%     |
| Linder   | 3%    | 6%      | 3%       | 3%    | 4%    | 5%     | 5%      | 6%      | 5%      |
| Wilson   | 7%    | 5%      | 8%       | 5%    | 7%    | 4%     | 4%      | 4%      | 3%      |
| Hayes    | 6%    | 4%      | 6%       | 4%    | 3%    | 10%    | 4%      | 8%      | 7%      |
| McMains  | 3%    | 2%      | 7%       | 4%    | 3%    | 4%     | 4%      | 7%      | 4%      |

### An Ambivalent Electorate

The potential for electoral volatility that inheres in the contemporary unanchored electorate is heightened in an election like this year's, where many voters find themselves tugged in opposite directions. Both Bill Clinton and Bob Dole get high marks from voters on some leadership dimensions but low marks from many of the same voters on others. Many say that they consider Dole of high integrity and properly credentialed for the presidency—but perhaps too old and too cold. In turn, many like Clinton and credit him with being an able and hardworking politician—but also say they don't trust him. In early September, when the President enjoyed a lead of 20 points or so in the trial heats, an ABC News/*Washington Post* survey asked whether "he has high personal moral and ethical standards." Just 39 percent said yes, 56 percent that he did not. In contrast, 70 percent credited Dole with high moral standards, while only 22 percent did not. An incumbent president may win reelection despite such judgments of him, because people make their final decision on a variety of considerations. But now as four years ago, Bill Clinton gets decidedly mixed grades on key elements of personal leadership.

The parties get mixed verdicts too. Many people at once give the Republicans the edge on such important matters as controlling the growth of government spending and managing foreign policy, while crediting the Democrats with "caring more about needs and problems of women," and as better on environmental issues. Overall, the two parties stand in essential parity in public ratings.

Bill Clinton is running for re-election at a time when the US economy is strong—and even more importantly, when its strength is widely recognized. In September 1992, just 29 percent of respondents told Gallup they thought economic conditions were on the whole getting better, but in early September this year, 52 percent said they were improving. At the same time, substantial pluralities say that the country's most serious problems are in the moral realm, not economic. A large body of polling emphatically rejects the suggestion that the public is generally "feeling good" about the state of the nation as it approaches the November vote. (See pp. 15-25.)

What's more, while much of the public is satisfied with economic developments of the past four years, which favor the incumbent, it remains broadly conservative on both social issues and role-of-government questions. As to the latter, a recent Roper Center review of the data shows Americans as disinclined now to endorse more government for national problem solving as they were in the fall of 1994 and early 1995. When ABC News and the *Washington Post* asked in August of this year, whether "you favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services," 63 percent said smaller government—the exact proportion taking that position in January 1995 just after the election (p. 25).

Many Americans' assessments of the candidates, the parties, the issues, and the state of the nation thus leave them of mixed minds on how to vote. Such an electorate isn't likely to be "locked up" for any candidate six weeks before the balloting. It's surprising, then, that so many politicians, journalists, and other observers have given so much weight to the trial heats to date—and have been so ready on the basis of them to award the election to Clinton.

### Bouncing Polls

Poll soundings have bounced around a good bit. The daily tracking polls clearly reflect not only actual changes in voter sentiment, but other things that inhere to these polls themselves. For example, who happens to be reachable by telephone on particular days? Republicans seem to be harder to reach than Democrats on weekends. The Gallup tracking poll done for *USA Today* and CNN found the contest between Clinton and Dole holding steady from Monday through Friday, September 23-27, at a 10-percentage-point lead for the president. When the Wednesday and Thursday polls were dropped, however, and Saturday and Sunday polls added to the three-day rolling average, Clinton's lead ballooned to 22 points (56%-34%). Those interviewed on Saturday and Sunday declared themselves for Clinton by a margin close to two to one, whereas those polled Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday backed the president by 9 points (48%-39%). It's just plain silly to suggest that anything happened in this span to cause

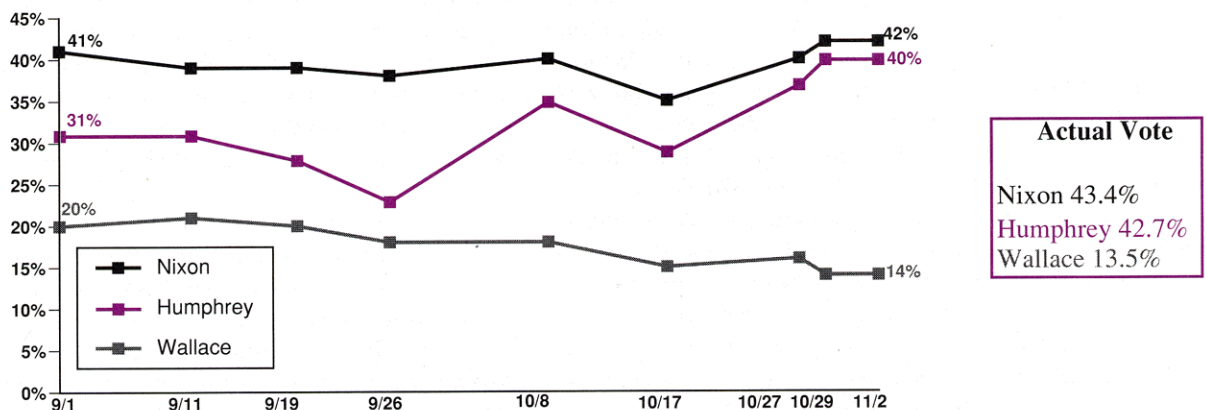
## Election '96: The Polls

significant movement, even with an unanchored electorate. The composition of those interviewed Saturday and Sunday was simply different in partisan terms from that of the preceding weekdays. With the abnormal Saturday-Sunday numbers included, the Gallup tracking poll had Clinton up by 25 points over September 28-30, while another poll, by The John Zogby Group for Reuters, on the same dates, put the Clinton lead at 11 points.

The bouncing aside, the President is certainly well ahead as the campaign enters the homestretch. The critical question is, "How firm are the numbers?" Is Clinton's lead so well grounded that it's unlikely to change, or is it wide but shallow? As I see it, the underlying structure of this election points to a fairly close final outcome, not a landslide, and suggests that the preferences trial heats have been recording are weakly held.

In 1948, Gallup showed Harry Truman trailing in late September, but he went on to win in the November balloting. Nonetheless, in the 60-year span for which we have survey data, the candidate leading in September has usually triumphed. But there's often been a lot of movement from poll findings a month or so before election day to the actual results. For example, a Gallup tracking poll of September 28-30, 1992, found Clinton leading Bush by 16 points. The Democratic candidates won, of course, but by a 5.6 percent margin in the popular vote. In 1968, a Gallup survey of September 26 through October 1 had Richard

**Figure 2**  
**The 1968 Nixon-Humphrey Race Tightened Markedly Down the Stretch**  
**Polling Trial Heats**



Nixon ahead of Hubert Humphrey by 15 percentage points, with George Wallace a strong third. Humphrey came on strong, though, and Nixon won by just seven-tenths of one percentage point in the popular vote.

There was a good basis for predicting that the race would tighten in years like 1968 and 1992. In the Nixon-Humphrey contest, the Democratic party found itself that year bitterly divided over Vietnam, but at the same time enjoyed great advantages including a huge margin over the Republicans in partisan identification. It was unlikely that the overall mix of factors—some favoring the Democrats, others the Republicans—would in the end produce a lopsided result. In contrast, the 1984 race between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale looked like a landslide from the beginning: Not only the polls pointed to it, but all of the underlying elements—from Reagan's personal standing to a resurgent national mood and a strong economy—were going the Republicans' way.

Five weeks out from presidential balloting, analysts need to focus on the strength of the attachments the trial heats capture. The structure underlying some elections indicates great potential for change as the contest evolves from hypothetical choice to actual vote. This year's contest has a great potential for late change. The electorate is remarkably unanchored in partisan terms, and it brings sharply conflicted assessments to its presidential choice.



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