

## PREFACE

# Pollsters under Attack

It's a tragic irony that one of the twentieth century's most celebrated social inventions, widely anticipated as a means of enhancing democracy, has turned out to do the opposite. When in the mid-1930s George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley unveiled their scientific method of conducting public opinion polls, they expected that the people's voices would now be heard not just at election time, but continuously. And in one sense, they were absolutely prescient. These scientific pollsters launched an enterprise that has revolutionized the way history is recorded. Before that time, historians "studied nations in the aggregate, and gave us only the story of princes, dynasties, sieges, and battles."<sup>1</sup> Now, with an archive of polls, historians can study the people's history—detailed information about normal people's family lives, health, work habits, leisure and travel activities, religious beliefs and behavior, living arrangements, sexual activity, finances, experience with crime, and of course their attitudes about anything from politics, religion, and sports to the latest social fads and entertainment personalities. So profound is this new way of describing a nation and its people that it has essentially defined the concept of mass public, by "shaping Americans' sense of them-

selves as individuals, members of communities, and citizens of a nation.”<sup>2</sup>

A highly influential subset of these national polls record voters’ preferences during election campaigns and measure the public’s opinions on government policies. These two areas of measurement are important because of their clear relation to our country’s democratic form of government, which—according to famed scholar and political scientist Harold D. Lasswell—depends on the vital interplay between government and the people. “Government acts upon public opinion, and public opinion acts openly and continually upon government,”<sup>3</sup> he wrote at the beginning of World War II. Six decades later, two other noted political scientists, Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro, made a similarly powerful point about the need for government to listen to the people, “Whether *democratic* government survives is not foreordained or guaranteed. What is critical is creating the expectation that substantial government responsiveness to public opinion is appropriate and necessary.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, the areas of public opinion most relevant to the democratic process are measured almost exclusively by the major national media polls. Of course, they survey much more than voter preferences during election campaigns and ongoing attitudes toward public policy, and their contributions to our understanding of American culture are immense. Their performance in the area of democratic public opinion, however, has been less stellar. Indeed, it’s in this area where their influence differs starkly from what was originally hoped.

FOR THIRTEEN YEARS I was employed by the Gallup Organization, with principal responsibilities initially as managing editor and subsequently as senior editor of the Gallup Poll. During that time, from March 1993 until April 2006, I shared the frustration that virtually all of the media pollsters felt as we took criticism from all quarters for supposed biases in our polls.

Some of the criticisms simply reflected a lack of understanding about the nature of sampling. Indeed, the complaint pollsters hear most frequently from irate citizens is, “Why wasn’t I polled?” Once, when I was being interviewed on radio, a caller demanded to know if his name was on a list the Gallup Poll would never call because he was a liberal (or conservative, I forget which). I was tempted to tell him I would check it out and get back to him, but I didn’t. A good corporate representative at the time, I didn’t want to say anything that might even hint at a biased selection process. I reassured him that as far as was possible, every residential telephone number in the country was eligible to be called, and that it was up to an apolitical computer to randomly select his household (at least if he lived in the forty-eight contiguous states; typically Gallup and other pollsters exclude Alaska and Hawaii because of their inconvenient time zones and small populations).

Other criticisms, however, were more difficult to parry. One of the most intense periods of controversy occurred on September 17, 2004, two weeks after the Republican National Convention that nominated President George W. Bush for a second term. My news story on the Gallup website reported the results of the latest CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll with the headline, *Bush Bounce Keeps on Going*.<sup>5</sup> The “bounce” I was referring to was the surge in support that a presidential candidate typically gets after his party’s nomination convention. Bush led by 3 percentage points before the convention, but was up by 7 points afterward. Ten days later, his lead had expanded an additional 6 points, and he led Senator John Kerry 55 percent to 42 percent.

The problem for anybody who cared even a smidgeon about the presidential race was that the day before my story was posted, Pew Research announced a dead heat between Bush and Kerry, and its headlines read, *Kerry Support Rebounds; Race Again Even*. The story noted that while Bush had surged to a 12-point lead after the Republican convention, the Bush bounce had suddenly disappeared.<sup>6</sup>

It's not unusual that polls conducted in roughly the same time period will conflict with each other, though such conflicts are still treated as aberrations. Usually, one can attribute the apparent contradictions to different interviewing dates or to dissimilar question wording. And, of course, there is always the possibility that one poll was just plain wrong, an explanation most likely to be heard if one of the polling organizations has a poor reputation anyway.

The conflicting results by Gallup and Pew, however, could not be explained away by any of the usual excuses. These were two titans in the polling industry, both highly respected among the news media, and neither poll could be immediately dismissed out of hand. Moreover, the dates of interviews for both surveys were almost identical, and there was no issue of question wording because each poll included the industry's standard question about which candidate a respondent would vote for if the election were held "today."

Press reaction to the conflicting results was explosive. The next day my colleague Jeff Jones, the Gallup Poll's managing editor, and I were buried by calls from reporters around the country demanding an explanation for the differences between the polls. Usually we referred such calls to Frank Newport, editor in chief, but on this day he was traveling. Nevertheless, he called from the airport in Detroit, asking how we had been dealing with the calls. He, too, had responded to several calls and was irritated that most reporters seemed to be critical of Gallup rather than Pew. Many in the press had criticized Gallup's tracking polls in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, claiming our results were "too volatile." Even Pew's Andrew Kohut had called them "loopy." This time it was Pew's numbers that were loopy, but Pew seemed to be getting a free ride.

Ultimately, the issue was resolved in the press when Scott Keeter, the director of surveys at Pew, and I agreed that the difference might well be attributed to "timing"—the Pew poll was conducted over a five-day period, Gallup's over three days, and

it was a volatile period of campaigning. Prior to reaching the agreement with Keeter, I had already explained to one reporter my view of what went wrong. Before posing its presidential vote question, Pew had asked several questions about the news in general, including one about Bush's hotly debated National Guard service. In the final poll before the election, when all pollsters are trying to produce as accurate a prediction as possible, no one would dare precede the vote question with other general news questions for fear of distorting the results. In this case, because it wasn't the final preelection poll—which would be compared against actual election results to determine the polling organization's accuracy—Pew apparently didn't feel the need to be so cautious. But Pew's probing questions about Bush before the vote question may very well have prompted many respondents to think twice about saying they were going to vote for the president, and thus depressed his apparent support. That, at least, was the view at Gallup. As it turned out, the reporter mentioned none of that in his story, and instead accepted the timing excuse.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these and other polling conflicts during the 2004 presidential campaign, most of the polls, including Pew's and Gallup's, converged on a similar prediction of a slight Bush victory. But many observers were not impressed. No matter the agreement they had reached by Election Day, the polls had showed sharply divergent results during the campaign. The negative feelings about the preelection polls were exacerbated by the performance of the exit polls, which early on Election Night showed Kerry winning the presidency, only to be reversed sometime after midnight to show a Bush victory.

"Spectacularly stinko," said the *Raleigh (N.C.) News and Observer* in a blistering appraisal of the final preelection polls.<sup>8</sup> Noted journalist Christopher Hitchens said, "All I wanted [from the 2004 presidential election]... is a result that made the pollsters look stupid and it well exceeded my expectations in this respect."<sup>9</sup> "Junk!" is what Bill Wheatley, vice president of

NBC News, called the 2004 exit polls.<sup>10</sup> Jimmy Breslin, writing for *Newsday*, was more expansive. “If you want a poll on the Kerry-Bush race, sit down and make up your own,” he said. “It is just as good as the monstrous frauds presented on television and the newspaper first pages.”<sup>11</sup> Peter Coy of *Businessweek* took a broader view. “More and more Americans believe polls are unscientific, unreliable, biased, privacy-invading, and a waste of time,” he wrote. “The reputation of pollsters is down around the abysmal level of that of journalists or used-car salesmen in the public’s mind. Pollsters know this depressing news because they asked.”<sup>12</sup> As we pollsters circled the wagons to fend off what we felt were irrational critics, we didn’t have far to look for the principal culprits causing the ruckus. As the comic strip character Pogo said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

FOR YEARS, we pollsters have systematically misled the American people about the accuracy of our polls, claiming a degree of precision in assessing public opinion that is far removed from reality. We do acknowledge, of course, a “margin of error” associated with the size of our samples, that well-known “plus or minus 3 percentage points” phrase suggesting that our polling numbers are usually very close to what we would have measured had we interviewed every living adult in the country. And just to cover ourselves, we add the not-so-innocuous fine print: “In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.” This phrase would scare the bejesus out of poll users if they understood what it really means. In fact, when I included this phrase on a report to one of Gallup’s bank clients, the astute contact at the bank insisted it be deleted. “It essentially says you can’t trust any of the numbers,” she said. “What good is a report like that?”

In practice, most poll users simply ignore the warning about

additional “error or bias,” much as confirmed smokers are undeterred by the health notice on the side of the cigarette pack. But unlike smokers, poll users can hardly be blamed; they ignore our warning because we pollsters ignore it. We treat our numbers not as though they are rough estimates of what the public is thinking, but rather as fairly precise reflections of reality. But look carefully at almost any set of polling results, and you will see large variations among highly reputable polling organizations.

The vagaries of polls continued into 2005 on such matters as Social Security, oil drilling in Alaska, stem cell research, a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages, troop levels in Iraq, and of course the controversy over Terri Schiavo, the Florida woman in a vegetative state for more than fifteen years who became a symbol of the culture war in America. On all of these issues, different polls showed significantly varied results—large majorities in one direction or another, depending on how pollsters decided to measure opinion.

Similarly, the 2006 midterm predictions of the U.S. House vote by seven media polls showed little consensus. Democrats were expected to win the total popular vote nationwide by just 3 percentage points according to Pew, but by 20 points according to CNN. Also in the single-digit predictions were *USA Today*/Gallup and the *ABC/Washington Post* polls, whereas *Fox*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* predicted winning margins that averaged 15 points. The final vote count was close to 7 percent.

In 2007, after the Democrats’ victory in the midterm elections, polls could not come to an agreement on whether the public favored Congress’s passing a nonbinding resolution to oppose President Bush’s troop surge or, separately, Congress’s cutting off funding for the war in Iraq altogether. Some polls showed large majorities in favor, whereas others showed large majorities opposed. Polls also differed on whether Americans supported an extension of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, wanted immediate U.S. troop withdrawal from

Iraq, or agreed with General Petraeus's report on the performance of the troop surge in Iraq.

The 2008 presidential campaign season began no better. Polls in all the early contests were far off the mark, the most notable being those in the New Hampshire Democratic Primary, which predicted a victory for Barack Obama by an average margin of 8 percentage points. He lost by 2 points, causing extreme consternation among pollsters and political observers alike. In South Carolina, the polls' errors were even greater, correctly predicting Obama to win but by a margin that was only half the actual outcome. Poll results in Iowa and Nevada were hardly better. Looking ahead to Super Tuesday, Frank Rich of the *New York Times* wrote, "As Tuesday's vote looms, all that's certain is that today's pollsters and pundits have so far gotten almost everything wrong."<sup>13</sup> The disastrous performance of the polls in the early part of the primary season followed an abominable performance in the preprimary period. For months, polls reported a "solid" lead for Hillary Clinton among the national primary electorate, so solid that it evaporated after the very first contest, the Iowa primary. Rudy Giuliani was consistently treated as the national Republican frontrunner, even though he trailed in all of the early contests and was dethroned from his exalted status within the first week of actual voting, never to recover.

These and similar examples raise serious doubts about the utility of polls. Can we trust any of their findings to represent what people are really thinking? What does it mean when they present conflicting numbers during election campaigns, and between elections when reporting on public policy matters? How biased are the polls? And just whose interests do they serve?

The national media polls referred to in this book include thirteen polling organizations. Probably the four most influential are the two affiliated with the most prestigious general newspapers in the country: the *New York Times*/CBS News poll

and the *Washington Post*/ABC News poll.<sup>14</sup> The other two polls in this group are Pew Research and *USA Today*/Gallup. These four organizations are more likely than others to see their results picked up by news media organizations for further dissemination, in part because of their reputations and in part because of the relative frequency of their polling. Though it's difficult to say which of the top four is the most influential, it's clear that, combined, these four polls overwhelmingly shape the country's public opinion environment. The other media polls mentioned in this book are those by CNN, NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the Associated Press/Ipsos, the *Los Angeles Times*, Fox, John Zogby (often with Reuters), and Harris Interactive (with different media organizations, but no regular partner). All of these organizations poll less frequently or have no daily national print partner. There is nothing in this classification that suggests the quality of the polls is less among the second group of polls than in the first group.

IN THIS BOOK, I focus on how these polls assess and influence the two most important areas of democratic public opinion: voters' preferences during an election campaign and public attitudes about government policies. For many people, public opinion has become whatever the major media polls say it is. My take is a bit different. I accept the principle that polls can measure public opinion, but only if they tell the truth about the public. Unfortunately, they don't. Instead, media polls give us distorted readings of the electoral climate, manufacture a false public consensus on policy issues, and in the process undermine American democracy.