9.3 Measuring Public Opinion

In 1936, in the depths of the Great Depression, *Literary Digest* announced that Alfred Landon would decisively defeat Franklin Roosevelt in the upcoming presidential election. Based on his own surveys, a young pollster named George Gallup disagreed with that prediction. Not only did Gallup choose Roosevelt as the winner, he publicly challenged newspapers and magazines to show the two polls side by side. The result was a triumph for Gallup, with Roosevelt winning by a landslide. For *Literary Digest,* the most widely circulated magazine in the country, the embarrassment of wrongly calling the election proved disastrous. Its credibility destroyed, the magazine soon slid into bankruptcy.

From Straw Polls to Scientific Sampling: The Evolution of Opinion Polling

After the 1936 election, many wondered how *Literary Digest* had blundered so badly. The magazine had a record of predicting presidential elections accurately since 1916 using **straw polls.** A straw poll is an informal survey of opinion conducted by a show of hands or some other means of counting preferences. So confident was the *Digest* of this method of predicting elections that it boasted of its "uncanny accuracy."

The magazine conducted its 1936 straw poll by mailing out more than 10 million ballots for people to mark with their choices for president. It predicted the winner based on the over 2 million ballots that were returned. What the *Digest* editors did not take into account was that their sample was biased. Most of the ballots went to people with telephones or registered automobiles. During the depths of the Depression, people wealthy enough to have phones and cars tended to be Republicans who favored Landon.

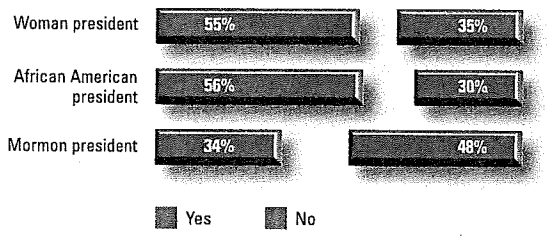
The secret of Gallup's success was his careful use of **scientific sampling.** Sampling is the process of selecting a small group of people who are representative of the whole population. Rather than mailing out surveys blindly, Gallup interviewed a sample of voters selected to mirror the entire electorate. His survey results underestimated Roosevelt's popularity on Election Day, but he did predict the winner correctly. His success marked the birth of the modern **opinion poll.**

Two Typical Opinion Polls

The basic elements of an opinion poll include (1) the name of the polling organization or sponsor, (2) the question asked, (3) an analysis of the data gathered, (4) the date of the poll, (5) the sample size, and (6) the margin of error. Note that the percentages on the graphs below do not all equal 100 percent. That is because they do not show the small percentage of people who answered "unsure."

Newsweek Poll

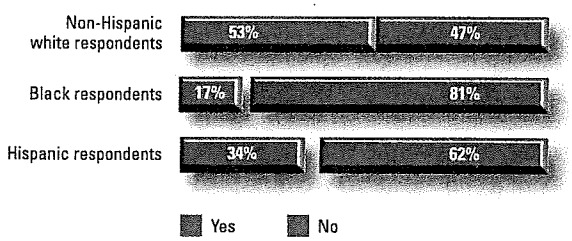
Do you think America is ready to elect a woman, African American, or Mormon president?



Date: December 6–7, 2006
Sample: 864 registered voters nationwide
Margin of error: ±4%

Gallup Poll

Do you feel that racial minorities in this country have equal job opportunities as whites, or not?



Date: June 8–25, 2006
Sample: 2,032 adults nationwide
Margin of error: ±6%

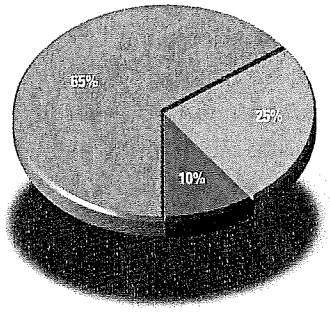
Sources: *Newsweek* and the Gallup Organization, as reported at PollingReport.com.

The Answer Depends on the Question

How you ask a polling question can make a big difference in the answers people give. The impact of wording was demonstrated in two polls conducted on unemployment. In the first poll, the question looked at only one side of the issue. In the second, the question looked at why people are unemployed from two points of view. As the results show, asking the question in this way made a considerable difference in how people responded.

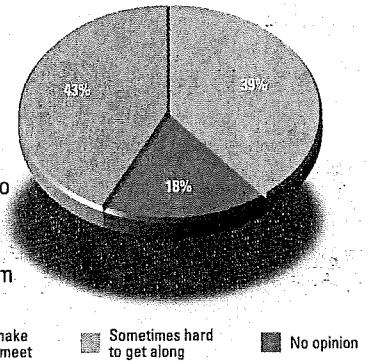
Poll 1

Do you agree or disagree with this statement: Any able-bodied person can find a job and make ends meet.



Poll 2

Some people feel that any able-bodied person can find a job and make ends meet. Others feel there are times when it is hard to get along and some able-bodied people may not be able to find work. Whom do you agree with most?



Source: Attributed to Albert H. Cantril, *The Opinion Connection,* Washington, DC: 1992, Brookings. In Robert S. Erickson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion,* Boston: 2003, Addison Wesley.

The Polling Process: Sample, Survey, and Sum Up

Professional polling organizations today follow much the same methods pioneered by Gallup and other early pollsters, though with a few improvements. The first step is to identify the population to be surveyed. The target population might be all adults, members of a political party, a specific age group, or people living in one community.

Most polling today is done by telephone. Phoning people randomly ensures that pollsters interview a representative sample of people. In most **random samples,** every individual has a chance of being selected. The number of people surveyed usually ranges from 500 to 1,500. Internet surveys are also widely used.

The opinions gathered in the survey are summed up and reported in terms of the percent choosing each response. Most polls also report a margin of error stated as plus or minus (±) some number of percentage points. The **margin of error** indicates how accurately the sample surveyed reflects the views of the target population. If the margin of error is small, you can assume that the results reported are close to the opinions of the population as a whole.

The Use of Polling to Measure Public Sentiment

George Gallup saw public opinion polls as the modern equivalent of the old-fashioned New England town meeting. Politicians, he said, should view poll results as a mandate from the people. No longer could public officials ignore voter sentiment, he argued, by claiming that public opinion was unknowable.

Today, opinion polls are widely used as means of gathering information about public sentiment. Businesses use polls to measure consumers' attitudes about their products. Groups of all sorts use polls to find out what their members are concerned about.

News organizations commission polls to measure the views of the American people on major issues of the day. One regularly repeated opinion poll, for example, asks people to respond to this open-ended question: *What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?*

As you might expect, the results change over time as new issues arise and capture the interest of the public.

Other news media polls ask very specific public policy questions. CNN, for example, conducted a poll early in 2007 to gauge public opinion on the issue of global warming. The poll asked, *Do you think the government should or should not put new restrictions on emissions from cars and industrial facilities such as power plants and factories in an attempt to reduce the effects of global warming?*

Seventy-five percent of the 500 adults surveyed answered that the government should impose new

restrictions. Whether such a result would change the mind of a lawmaker opposed to added restrictions is hard to know. But a legislator who agreed with the majority view might have been encouraged by this poll to press harder for new emission controls.

Presidents and other public officials use polls to measure how well they are doing in the eyes of the voters. They use the results to help them develop policies that they hope the public will support. In addition, the news media report regularly on the rise and fall of presidential approval ratings. During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan came to be known as the "Teflon president" because bad news never seemed to stick long enough to seriously damage his popularity.

The Use of Polling in Political Campaigns

Three special kinds of polls are widely used during elections. A long and detailed **benchmark poll** is often used by prospective candidates to "test the waters" before beginning a campaign. Candidates use information from such polls to identify which messages to emphasize in their campaigns and which to avoid.

Tracking polls are conducted during a campaign to measure support for a candidate on day-by-day basis. Pollsters survey groups of likely voters each night to find out how their views have been affected by the political events of that day. While each day's poll is just a snapshot of the electorate's views, taken together, tracking polls can reveal trends and shifts in attitudes over time.

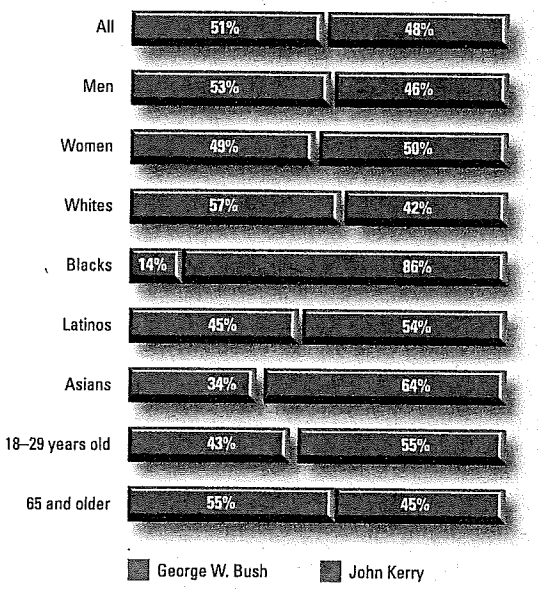
Exit polls are used by campaigns and the news media to predict the winners on Election Day long before the polls close. An exit poll is a survey of voters taken at polling places just after they have cast their ballots. Because ballots are cast in secret, exit polling is the only way we have of finding out how different age or ethnic groups of people voted and why.

The use of exit polls by television networks led to controversy in 1980 when newscasters predicted that Ronald Reagan had won the presidency long before polls closed in the West. Critics charged that announcing the winner so early discouraged western voters from going to the polls. As a result, television networks are more careful now not to predict the winner in the presidential race until the polls have closed everywhere in the country.

Polling of Voters on Election Day

This poll was conducted with 5,154 voters as they exited 136 polling places across the country on November 2, 2004. Each voter surveyed filled out a questionnaire asking how he or she had voted in the presidential election. The results were close to the actual vote count, with George W. Bush winning 50.7 percent of the votes cast and John Kerry 48.3 percent.

Los Angeles Times
2004 National Exit Poll



Source: *Los Angeles Times,* as reported at PollingReport.com.

In 2004, an exit poll based on interviews with voters in 49 states appeared on the Internet early on Election Day. The poll showed John Kerry leading George W. Bush, prompting Kerry's aides to start polishing his victory speech. This false prediction raised serious questions about the accuracy of exit polls. "They are not perfect and they have never been perfect and we have never taken them to be perfect," says a CBS News senior vice president, Linda Mason.

The Misuse of Polling to Influence Public Opinion

At times polls are used more to shape than to measure public opinion. Elected officials and special interest groups sometimes claim to be assessing public opinion by sending out mail surveys. The questions in these surveys are often rigged to generate highly favorable results for the sponsor of the poll. Former

These factors influence what you see and hear as news. Because reporters like novelty, you won't see many stories about ongoing issues or social problems. Because they want conflict, you won't see much coverage of compromise in the making of public policy. And because they are looking for impact, bad news almost always wins out over good. As an old saying in journalism goes, "If it bleeds, it leads."

9.5 The Influence of the Media in Political Campaigns

In 1960, Richard Nixon and John Kennedy participated in the first televised debate between two presidential candidates. Nixon, weakened by a bout of the flu, appeared nervous, awkward, and uneasy. His face looked pale and sweaty, all the more so because he did not allow the television producers to improve his appearance with makeup. Kennedy, in contrast, appeared confident, relaxed, and appealing.

Those who watched the debate on television concluded that Kennedy had "won." Those who listened on the radio considered Nixon the winner. The difference reflected not what the two candidates said about the issues, but rather the images they projected. This outcome underscored the growing importance of image over issues in political campaigns.

Image Making and the Role of Media Consultants

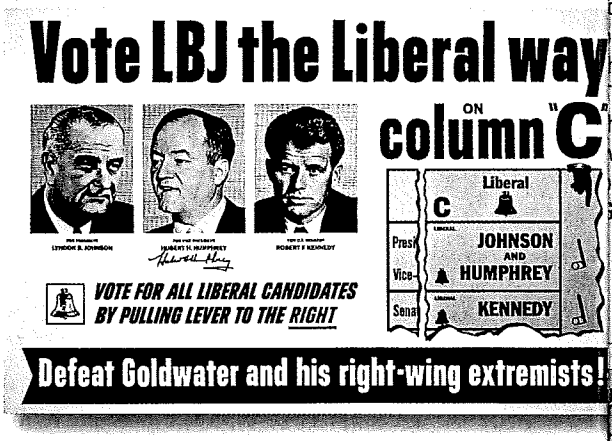
Kennedy's television triumph in 1960 contributed to the rise of new players in political campaigns: media consultants. Their job is to advise candidates on how to present a positive image to voters. They make sure, for example, that their candidates wear flattering colors that will show up well on television. They coach candidates on how to speak to the press and how to respond to voters' questions.

Media consultants also help candidates plan their media campaigns. They work with the news media to get free coverage of the campaign in newspapers and newscasts. However, most media coverage comes from paid political advertising. Media consultants help decide what ads should say and where and when they should appear.

Advertising is expensive. Candidates may spend up to 80 percent of their "war chests," or campaign funds, on paid ads. Media consultants use opinion

Common Persuasive Techniques Used in Political Advertising

Political campaigns use a number of persuasive techniques in an attempt to influence the opinions of voters. The more you know about these techniques, the better you will be at analyzing political advertising.



Name-Calling
Using personal attacks on an opponent to distract voters from the real issues of the campaign. The goal is to inspire doubts about the opponent's fitness for office by appealing to people's fears or prejudices. This 1964 ad uses name-calling to link presidential candidate Barry Goldwater to "right-wing extremists."

Transfer
Using symbols or images that evoke emotion to something unrelated, such as a candidate or proposition. This 1984 campaign poster links presidential candidate Walter F. Mondale and his running mate Geraldine Ferraro to beloved patriotic symbols such as Liberty and the American flag.

polls to make sure that money is spent effectively. They also work with **focus groups** to test the appeal of campaign messages. A focus group is a small group of people who are brought together to discuss their opinions on a topic of concern. Before the public sees a campaign ad, it has probably been discussed and tweaked by a focus group.

Types of Campaign Ads: Issue Versus Image

Political advertisements usually fall into two broad groups. The first group deals with issues, the second with images. Ads in either group can be positive or negative. Positive ads are aimed at making you like or respect a candidate, while negative ads are designed to make you dislike or fear his or her opponent. Both types of ads use persuasive techniques well known to advertisers. Some of those techniques are explained on the previous two pages.

Positive issue ads promote a candidate's position on topics calculated to appeal to voters. A positive issue ad might highlight the candidate's determination to improve funding for schools or to hold the line on taxes. Negative issue ads, on the other hand, criticize the opponent's stand on issues of importance to voters. An opponent who opposes the death penalty, for example, might be criticized in a negative issue ad for being "soft on crime."

A positive image ad might show the candidate as a selfless public servant, a strong leader, or someone who cares about ordinary people. The candidate might be portrayed as a hero or as just "plain folk." In contrast, a negative image ad might portray the opponent as weak, inexperienced, or lacking in integrity. Often negative ads include unflattering photographs of the opposition candidate. The desired effect is to convince voters that this person is somehow unfit for public office.

Attracting Media Coverage: Photo Ops and Streamlined Conventions

For all they spend on advertising, candidates and their media consultants work hard to attract news coverage as well. Almost all aspects of a campaign are designed to generate as much free publicity as possible. Often this is done by creating a **photo op**—short for photo opportunity—for the candidate. A photo op is a carefully staged event designed to produce memorable photographs and video images.

Not all photo ops work out as planned. Democratic presidential hopeful Michael Dukakis learned this the hard way in 1988. Wanting to show that he was strong on defense, Dukakis had himself photographed riding in a tank. Wearing an oversized helmet, he looked more comical than presidential.

One of the most famous photo ops in recent years occurred in 2003 when President Bush, wearing a flight suit, landed on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Lincoln* to announce the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq. Clearly visible in the background was a banner stating "Mission Accomplished." Images of President Bush being cheered by the *Lincoln*'s crew appeared in newscasts and newspapers across the nation.

National nominating conventions are also staged to attract maximum media coverage. In the past, conventions were dominated by long-winded speeches and debates over the nominees and platform that bored television viewers. As a result, the broadcast media drastically cut their coverage of these events. In response, parties have streamlined their conventions. Most serious business is completed off camera. Prime time speeches and events are designed mainly to promote the party's ideas and candidates to the viewing public.

Media Coverage of Elections: Horse Races and Soap Operas

Studies of election news coverage show that most reporting falls into two distinct patterns. The first pattern, **horse race coverage,** treats an election as a sporting event. Horse race stories focus on who is winning and why. Issues are discussed only in terms of whether they will help or hurt the candidate's chances. Opinion polls, often sponsored by a news organization, are used to track who is ahead or

behind. The results of the polls are then covered by the media as campaign news.

The second pattern of coverage, **soap opera stories,** focuses on the ups and downs of candidates and their campaigns. Soap opera stories thrive on gossip, scandals, and personality. Questions of "character" are more important than issues. During the 2004 election, for example, stories about Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry often dealt more with his "flip-flops" on issues than with the issues themselves.

In their hunger for soap opera stories, reporters sometimes practice what has become known as **"gotcha" journalism**. The aim of gotcha journalism is to catch the candidate making a mistake or looking foolish. An example of gotcha journalism occurred during the 2000 presidential primaries when a reporter gave then-governor George W. Bush a "pop quiz," asking him to name the leaders of Chechnya, Taiwan, India, and Pakistan. When Bush could name only one leader correctly, reporters ran stories with headlines like "Bush gets an F in foreign affairs."

Why Campaigns "Go Negative"

At some point during a campaign, media consultants may advise a candidate to "go negative." This means switching from a positive, upbeat campaign to **negative campaigning,** also known as **mudslinging**.

The decision to go negative is not taken lightly. Polls show that the public dislikes attack ads. Going negative also leaves the candidate open to criticism for running a mean-spirited campaign. As Adlai Stevenson warned in 1954, "He who slings mud generally loses ground."

Why then take the risk? Cathy Allen, an experienced media consultant, advises clients to consider negative campaigning only when the candidate has absolute proof that the opponent has done something wrong or when the candidate is facing an uphill battle and has little to lose.

In the end, campaigns go negative because it works. Some scholars argue that negative ads work by discouraging voters who might have supported a candidate under attack from going to the polls. Others contend, however, that negative campaigning actually stimulates voter interest. They argue that going negative works not by discouraging voting, but instead by causing more voters to go to the polls and choose a different candidate on Election Day.

Like it or hate it, negative campaigning is part of our political tradition. How well it works depends on how you and voters like you react to what you see and hear during each election season.

Summary

In a democracy, public opinion serves as a guide to elected officials, a guard against costly mistakes, and a kind of glue that holds us together despite our differences. While the mass media may help shape public opinion, they are also shaped by it.

Public opinion Public opinion is the sum of a large number of individual opinions. Our basic views about politics are formed early in life through political socialization. Agents of socialization include family, schools, religion, friends, and the news media.

Opinion polling Public opinion is best measured by scientific opinion polling. Accurate results depend on surveying a random but representative sample of the target population.

Mass media Americans today receive information from print, broadcast, and electronic media. The news media serve as government watchdogs, agenda setters, and forums for an exchange of views.

Political campaigns Politicians depend on both the free and paid media to reach voters during campaigns. Today, image seems as important as issues in both campaign advertising and media coverage of candidates.