



Harvard University
Program On Survey Research

Preserving Survey Quality in a Time of Poll Proliferation

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 CBS NEWS
P O L L

ABOUT “SURVEY QUALITY”

EVERYTHING I AM SAYING HAS BEEN
SAID BEFORE

EVERYTHING I AM SAYING WILL BE SAID
AGAIN

These problems have been with us a long time, and we still have not been able to solve the problem or improve reporting. .

THE CURRENT REALITY-1

- Greater political polarization, both during and between elections
- Has brought increased attacks on polling
- AND more visible scrutiny of polling results

**IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, HOW DO WE
PRESERVE SURVEY QUALITY?**

THE CURRENT REALITY-2

- Poll proliferation changes the way polls are evaluated
- With little distinction between polls with “good” and “bad” methods
- There is more focus on what “the polls” say

**IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, HOW DO WE
PRESERVE SURVEY QUALITY?**

WHY IT SHOULD MATTER

Poll numbers, as reported, create “precision” about a subject – and about the public’s view of it.

The institutionalization of polls within news coverage adds “precision” to journalism -- but that can sometimes be a false precision

Polls now set the reality of success or failure of governments, even if they – or the reporting of them -- are inaccurate

Even the 2008 election controversies didn’t appear to change journalism’s reliance on polls

POLARIZATION VS. PROLIFERATION

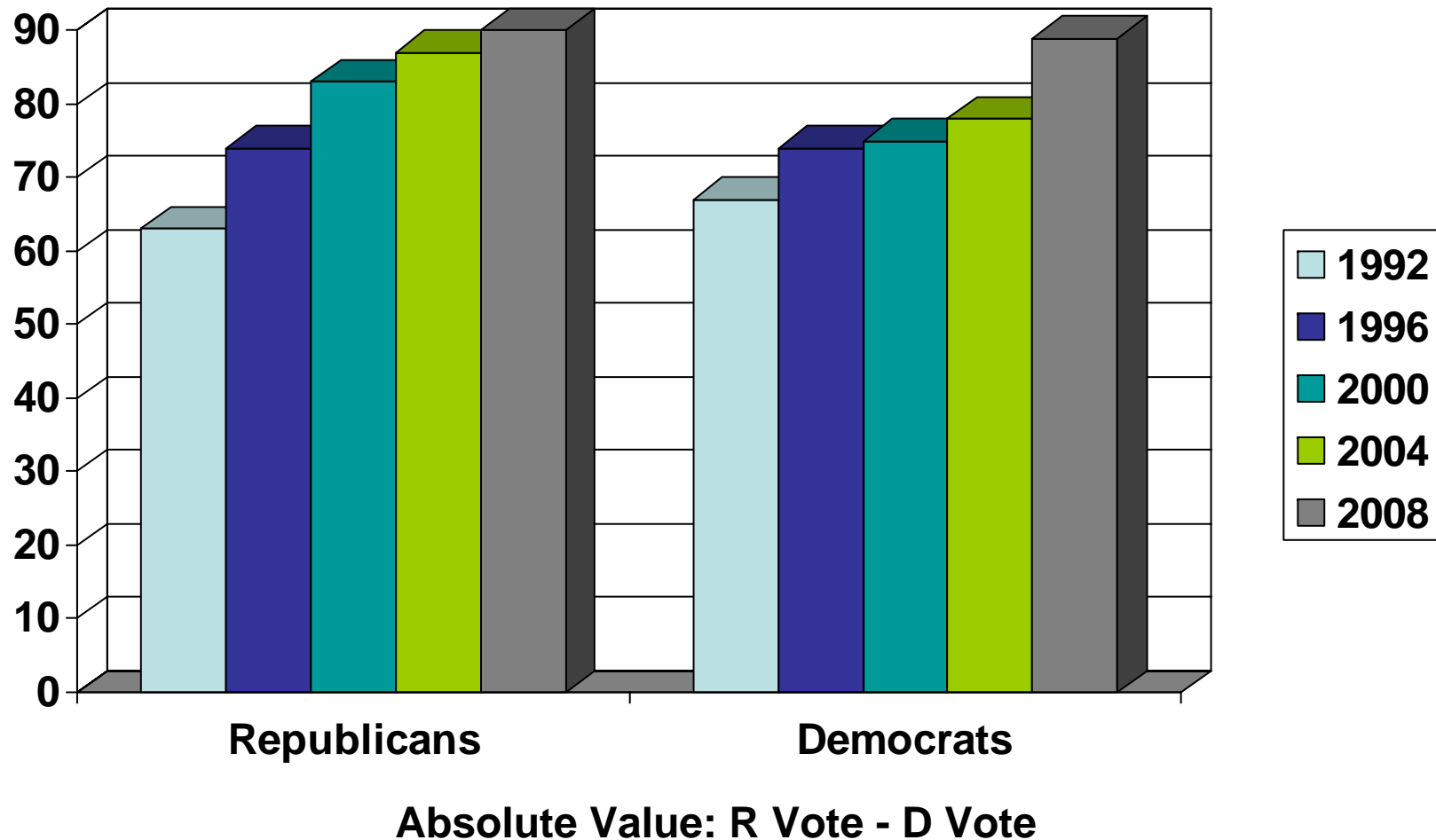
- Increased polarization and partisan attacks increase the scrutiny of polls – probably a good thing, even when the criticism is unfair or wrong.
- Increased proliferation does the opposite, where individual polls are subsumed by references to “the polls” – and differences in quality are ignored.

Partisan Criticism: NOT NEW

“The whole scheme is one of fraud and debauchery, and may be taken as the first step to do away with popular elections under the law, and place the molding of public opinion in the hands of millionaires and corporations.”

-- Chicago Democratic Party, 1896

Polarization: CHANGES IN PARTY VOTING 1992-2008



Polarization: PARTISANSHIP IN ELECTIONS

**Number of States Outperforming
Either Party's National Average by
More than 5 Points**

2008	31
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2004	32
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2000	27
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1996	24
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1992	18
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1988	23
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1984	17
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Polarization: PARTISANS KNOW WHAT TO SAY IN POLLS

6/92 GHW Bush 34% approval rating

Republicans 55%

Democrats 18%

REP-DEM APPROVAL 37 pts.

3/06 GW Bush 34% approval rating

Republicans 74%

Democrats 6%

REP-DEM APPROVAL 68 pts.

Polarization: TODAY

Job Approval Ratings for First-Year Presidents

Job Approval	<u>Total</u> %	<u>Rep</u> %	<u>Dem</u> %	<u>Ind</u> %	<i>R-D Diff</i>
Obama, March 9-12, 2009	59	27	88	57	-61
Bush, April 18-22, 2001	55	87	36	56	+51
Clinton, April 1-4, 1993	49	26	71	47	-45
Bush, May 4-7, 1989*	56	79	41	48	+38
Reagan, March 13-16, 1981*	60	87	41	61	+46
Carter, March 25-28, 1977*	72	56	81	70	-25
Nixon, Mid-March, 1969*	65	84	55	65	+29

* 1969-1989 data from Gallup.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center

Polarization: OTHER ISSUES

Was U.S. military action against Iraq the right thing to do?

	1991	2003	2006
Total	70%	69%	41%
Republicans	84%	87%	71%
Democrats	59%	50%	20%
DIFFERENCE	25	37	51

THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL ATTACKS ON POLLS

- The political nature of the attacks reduces belief in polls' "precision"
- Attacks are magnified by the "echo chamber" of news shows and internet blogs -- from BOTH sides – and matter more in intense campaigns with polarization between the parties
- **BUT... EVEN PARTISAN ATTACKERS OFTEN RAISE IMPORTANT METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS: WEIGHTING, QUESTION WORDING, INTERVIEWER BIAS**

BUT WHAT ABOUT PROLIFERATION?

NUMBERS in 2008:

- 287 separate vote questions in the Roper Center iPoll database – about the same as 2004
- Many polls are not in the Roper database (Rasmussen, SurveyUSA, most partisan polls)
- There were AT LEAST 24 separate polls released in the five days between Iowa and New Hampshire

**WITH NUMBERS LIKE THIS, DOES
THE QUALITY OF INDIVIDUALS
POLLS MATTER?**

Proliferation: NOT NEW

- An issue whenever a new technology makes polling easier
 - 1970's when telephones replaced in-person interviewing
 - 1990's when PC took the place of mainframe computers
 - Now IVR, and the web make polling simpler and more accessible
 - And the political and entertainment worlds are also poll-heavy

Proliferation: 2008's PROBLEM

- In this election, the results of polls conducted using good methods differed little from those conducted using less acceptable methods!
 - Polls including cell phones samples generally had slightly more Democratic outcomes
 - Poll aggregator sites increased in prominence and sophistication, adding a variety of models of how to average polls (though there were few if any differences at the end)

THE 2008 DISCUSSION

- By 2008, nearly every polling organization had its own blog or web column
- But most of these are without the participation of traditional associations like AAPOR and NCPP
 - Few AAPOR postings
 - Zero NCPP's Polling Review Board postings
- And discussion this year was more about “the polls” – how they behaved as a group – final outcomes, New Hampshire, did they “converge” at the end.

AS BAD AS 1948?

"The total collapse of the public opinion polls shows that the country is in good health ... although you can take a nation's pulse, you can't be sure that the nation hasn't just run up a flight of stairs, and although you can take the nation's blood pressure, you can't be sure that if you came back in 20 minutes you'd get the same reading. This is a damn fine thing....

AS BAD AS 1948?

"We are proud of Americans for clouding up the crystal ball, for telling one thing to a poll-taker, another thing to a voting machine. This is an excellent land."

--- THE NEW YORKER

HAVE WE MADE PROGRESS?

- The discourse has changed since 1948, BUT...
- Same criticisms and questions are being raised, perhaps in a more intense environment, with educated partisans
- The sheer number of polls -- means good polling information is ignored
- We may have lost control of the dialogue – as well as of the product

WHAT IS WRONG WITH WHAT'S BEEN DONE?

- Disclosure requirements and setting standards limit the discussion to the professional polling community
- Punishment tends NOT to be doled out to the worst offenders, but to those in the middle, and never to reporters
- We don't recognize how the country's relationship to polls has changed – their expectations and dependence.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO THAT IS NEW?

- TRY AND DISTINGUISH GOOD POLLS FROM BAD (which we haven't been able to do yet)
- FOCUS ATTENTION ON LEADERS OF NEWS ORGANIZATIONS – NOT JUST JOURNALISTS
 - Those who run the news media have the power to set standards internally

SO WHAT CAN WE DO THAT IS NEW?

- TRY AND CONVINCE PEOPLE NOT TO CONDUCT POLLS. THE CHEAPENING OF THE BRAND VALUE MAY DISCOURAGE NEW POLLSTERS
- PERHAPS BY 2012 FEWER PRIMARY POLLS
 - THE NUMBER OF TRACKING POLLS HAS SHRUNK, ESPECIALLY WITH AN INCUMBENT
- RECOGNIZE ONE PERSON – OR GROUP -- AS THE ARBITER
- IGNORE MEASUREMENTS OF INDIVIDUAL POLLING ACCURACY, SINCE THERE IS NO GUARANTEE THAT THEY IMPLY QUALITY

SO WHAT CAN WE DO THAT IS NEW?

- ACCEPT THE NEW DISCOURSE: “THE POLLS” AND THINK ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS AGGREGATION ON UNDERSTANDING QUALITY
- DEVELOP A NEW LANGUAGE FOR MEASUREMENTS THAT ARE NOT OF GOOD QUALITY (DON’T CALL THEM “POLLS”)
- CONSIDER INCREASED COOPERATION AMONG POLL COMPETITORS; CRITICISM OF “THE POLLS” AFFECTS EVERYONE
- **AND THERE MUST BE BETTER IDEAS!**



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