

## Political Polling

*Do polls accurately measure public attitudes?*

Smart phones, social media and the Internet have made it easier than ever for people to make their views known, but the new technology can make it harder for political pollsters to gather and measure public opinions with precision or consistency. They face public suspicions of partisanship, reluctance to provide candid answers and — as cellphone use grows — difficulty reaching respondents by the traditional method of random calls to household landlines. Meanwhile, critics charge that the news media pay too much attention to “horse-race” polls showing who leads in political races and not enough to candidates’ policy ideas. The 2014 elections, in which pollsters miscalculated the results of a number of closely watched races, cast a harsh spotlight on the industry, but pollsters contend their record has improved over the years. Some experts see promise in the increasing use of “opt-in” polls such as those on the Internet, but the approach is controversial.



Statistician Nate Silver predicted Barack Obama would win the 2012 presidential election in his FiveThirtyEight.com blog, which aggregates polls rather than relying on a single survey. Critics say media and pollsters put too much emphasis on the so-called “horse race” aspect of election campaigns and not enough on substance.

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# Political Polling

BY CHUCK MCCUTCHEON

## THE ISSUES

Before November's elections, many political pollsters thought they had the races nailed: Incumbent Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., was a shoo-in for re-election to the U.S. Senate, and Georgia's contests for Senate and governor would be so close that runoff elections would be needed.

Those predictions turned out to be very wrong. Warner sweated out a win by less than 1 percentage point, while Republicans prevailed by such large margins in Georgia that no runoffs were necessary. Polls in several other states also were off the mark.

"Boy, is that an industry that needs some housecleaning," University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato said the morning after the election.<sup>1</sup>

The November results — along with polls that failed to anticipate House Majority Leader Eric Cantor's GOP primary loss in Virginia in June to a virtually unknown college professor — dramatically illustrated the challenges confronting pollsters. Even as technology has made it easier than ever for people to give their opinions, consistently measuring those opinions with pinpoint precision has grown exceedingly difficult. With the 2016 presidential race beginning to unfold, the stakes are high for pollsters: Their work plays a crucial role in influencing the flow of campaign donations and determining overall public support for candidates.

Political polling "is in a state of transition, certainly," says Michael Link, president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the field's professional association.



AP Photo/Richmond Times-Dispatch/Bob Brown

*Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., debates Republican strategist Ed Gillespie, left, during the 2014 Virginia Senate race. Polls predicted Warner would easily win re-election, but he just squeaked by. In another dramatic polling miscue — also in Virginia — polls failed to anticipate House Majority Leader Eric Cantor's stunning primary defeat by a virtually unknown college professor. Despite their failures, polls are expected to play a key role in the 2016 presidential race and other contests.*

Political strategist Patrick Ruffini, a former technology official at the Republican National Committee (RNC), has a more dismal view. "If anything," he said, "the challenge for polling right now is to keep it from getting any worse than it is."<sup>2</sup>

Polling has become entangled in the nation's prevailing polarized political climate, with both politicians and the public questioning the validity of polls. At a 2011 rally in Iowa, 2008 GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin colorfully disparaged surveys showing that many Americans regarded her unfavorably: "Polls? . . . They're for strippers and cross-country skiers," she declared.<sup>3</sup>

A variety of people and institutions conduct political polls, often attached to particular candidates and parties, and most of their surveys are kept secret. Others, whose work is made public, are affiliated with colleges, think tanks and news outlets. Pollsters also help interest groups and political donors hone their messages or decide to whom they should give money.

In his 2012 re-election campaign, President Barack Obama's strategists created an "analytics department" that was five times larger than the one Obama used in 2008. The department combined statistics from pollsters with material from other sources, including social-media sites such as Twitter. It used that information to run tests predicting how people could be influenced by certain appeals.

Obama's campaign also used polls to develop a sophisticated understanding of who would vote in key states. In Ohio alone, it collected polling data from about 29,000

people — an enormous sample that enabled the campaign to study Obama's appeal across a wide demographic spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

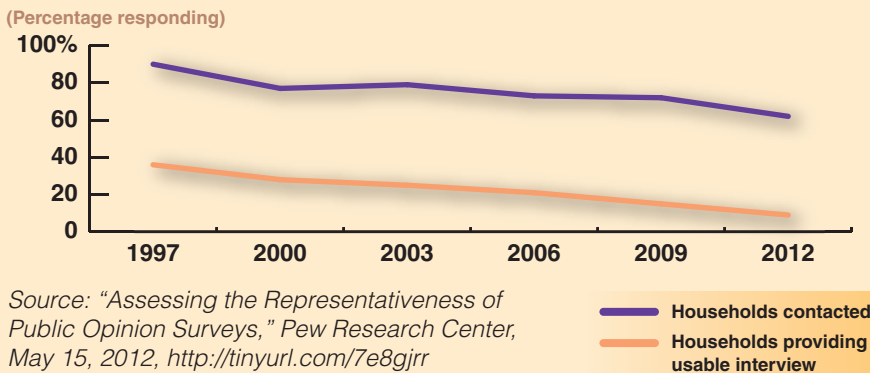
The news media make a big deal out of political polls. Surveys showing a president's job-approval rating, or the results of polls on a controversial topic such as the Affordable Care Act, become prominent news. And polls draw intensive coverage in the months and years leading up to elections.

Election polls require assessments of what groups will show up to vote and in what proportion to other groups. "Election polls are a special breed among public-opinion surveys," said Cliff Zukin, a Rutgers University public

## Pollsters Finding Households Harder to Reach

The percentage of households providing usable interviews for Pew Research Center polls conducted via landline telephones fell from 36 percent to 9 percent between 1997 and 2012. Success rates for contacting households in which an adult was reached also dropped, from 90 percent to 62 percent.

### Households Responding to Pew Research Surveys



policy professor. "They call for more judgments — the art rather than science of the craft — on the part of the pollster than other types of polls." <sup>5</sup>

The United States isn't the only place where election polling can be difficult. After September's referendum on whether Scotland should become independent from the United Kingdom, analysts noted the final "no" vote was by a much wider margin than polls had predicted. <sup>6</sup>

Telephone surveys historically have been the main means by which pollsters gathered public opinion about candidates, issues and consumer products. But pollsters of all types have had to cope with dramatic changes in telephone use. In 2009, the percentage of homes without a landline was less than 25 percent; by July 2014, it exceeded 40 percent. <sup>7</sup>

When nearly all Americans had a landline, pollsters had a relatively easy time designing surveys. These days, however, a "dual-frame sample" — which combines landlines and cellphones — provides the closest to a true probability sample, the bedrock

principle of phone polling. Probability sampling is based on the concept that for the universe of people being surveyed, each member has a defined and equal likelihood of being selected to participate in the survey.

"The polling field has been addressing developments in technology that have made it harder and harder to reach people," says Tim Vercellotti, director of Western New England University's Polling Institute in Springfield, Mass. "It began with [the advent of] answering machines, then caller ID, then cell phones." The latter "really sort of cut the knees out from under the industry," he said, because cell users are less willing to take calls from unfamiliar numbers.

Vercellotti and other pollsters say the industry is doing better at incorporating cellphones. But their increasing use has come as public response rates to polling questions have plummeted, from 36 percent in 1997 to just 9 percent in 2012, according to the Pew Research Center on the People & the Press. <sup>8</sup>

In addition, computer-executed polls, dubbed "robopolls," that rely on auto-

matic rather than person-to-person dialing, have proliferated, and federal regulations bar most robopolls from calling cell phones, a limitation that can end up omitting voters.

Another new type of polling, Internet-based opt-in "nonprobability" polls, have begun to flourish and are drawing controversy. \* (See "At Issue," p. 137.)

Politicians and interest groups employ such opt-in polls to engage followers. But the questions can be loaded. The website of Virginia GOP Rep. Morgan Griffith, for example, recently featured an "issue survey" asking questions such as, "Do you support or oppose the Environmental Protection Agency enacting new regulations that make it harder to use coal as an energy source, killing local jobs and driving up electricity rates?" <sup>9</sup>

In 2008, long after House Democratic leaders refused to consider some liberal Democrats' proposal to impeach GOP President George W. Bush over the decision to invade Iraq, then-California Democratic Rep. Pete Stark — a liberal and outspoken Bush critic — drew admiration from anti-Iraq War groups when he asked in a survey on his House website if voters backed impeachment. <sup>10</sup>

Griffith's and Stark's polls weren't intended to be scientific. But pollsters say scientific nonprobability polls conducted online increasingly are worthy of consideration because pollsters can perform statistical adjustments, known as "weighting," to compensate for those who are not Internet users.

In the old days of landline phone polls, pollsters did not need to make such adjustments very often. "When everyone had a landline and answered it . . . even a no-name call center could [dial] random digits and get an arguably

\* Nonprobability polls are those in which the participants choose to participate themselves or are chosen for their particular demographic attributes, rather than just being randomly selected. Such polls include so-called "opt-in" polls in which people volunteer — generally online — to take part.

representative sample of adults with a reasonable response rate,” says Mark Blumenthal, *The Huffington Post’s* senior polling editor. “Media and academic organizations could do even better. Very little weighting was required.”

Weighting has been shown to improve the quality of polls. Pew concluded in a 2012 study that telephone surveys that include landlines and proper weighting “continue to provide accurate data on most political, social and economic measures.”<sup>11</sup> But if weighting assumptions prove wrong in either phone or Internet polls, they can skew accuracy. Some experts say excessive and improper weighting plagued too many 2014 election surveys.

“The problem, from my point of view, is that there’s just so much weighting going on,” Stuart Rothenberg, a political forecaster and columnist, said at a November forum on polling.

Scientific polls also have become more expensive. Statistician Nate Silver, founder of the popular *FiveThirtyEight.com* blog about polls, said the cost of a top-quality poll “can run well into five figures, and it has increased as response rates have declined.”<sup>12</sup>

Pollsters maintain that their mistakes have been exaggerated and that polling accuracy has demonstrably improved. Eric McGhee, a research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan think tank, concluded in October 2014 that polling in Senate contests has become so much more accurate since 1990 that “looked at a certain way,” today could be considered “a golden age of polls.”<sup>13</sup>

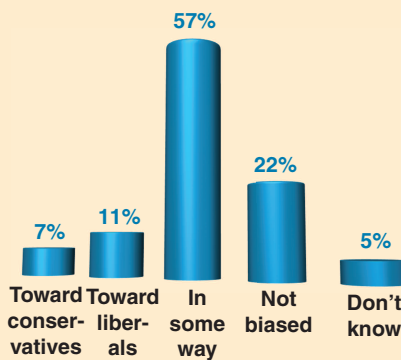
Pollsters say their surveys get unfairly blamed when candidates lose or are badly trailing their opponent. “People expect polls to do too much,” says Democratic pollster Anna Greenberg. “Polls can’t predict turnout, or measure the effectiveness of a field operation or campaign.”

As pollsters, academics, the news media and others debate political polling, here are some of the questions being raised:

## Most Americans See Bias in Polls

*Three-fourths of American adults surveyed recently said public opinion polls are biased, with more than half saying they are slanted “in some way.”*

### Percentage of Respondents Who Said Polls Are Biased\*



\* Totals do not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey based on telephone interviews with 562 adults.

Source: “Kantar’s ‘Path to Public Opinion’ Poll,” Kantar Group, Sept. 4, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/kbq8jgk>

### *Do polls show a persistent political bias?*

For years, politicians and activists across the political spectrum have argued that too many polls are slanted in favor of the opposition. A 2013 survey by the London-based research firm Kantar found three-quarters of Americans say most polls are “biased toward a particular point of view.”<sup>14</sup> (See graphic, above.)

Before the 2012 presidential election, some Republicans alleged that polls were stacked against them. GOP blogger Dean Chambers started a website, UnskewedPolls.com, to remove what he charged was the deliberate inclusion of too many Democrats in a projection of the voting population.<sup>15</sup> In Sep-

tember, the site’s polls put Republican Mitt Romney up by more than 7 percentage points at a time when regular polls showed Obama ahead by several percentage points.<sup>16</sup> Romney eventually lost by nearly 4.

In 2004, Democrats were the ones complaining about biased polls. When a Gallup poll showed Democratic presidential contender John Kerry trailing President Bush, the liberal group MoveOn.org took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* blasting what it called Gallup’s “flawed methodology,” adding, “This is more than a numbers game. Poll results profoundly affect a campaign’s news coverage as well as the public’s perception of the candidates.”<sup>17</sup>

Some Democrats again criticized the polls in 2014, before Republicans made large gains in the congressional elections. Democratic strategist Brent Budowsky wrote in the Capitol Hill newspaper *The Hill*: “There are so many razor-thin Senate races that confident predictions of which party holds Senate control are, to paraphrase a line from Jack Nicholson in “Chinatown,” wind from a duck’s derriere.”<sup>18</sup>

But people who study polling say that while polls have sometimes underestimated one party’s support over another’s, it’s not because of partisanship.

“There have been years, like 1980 and 1994, when the polls did underestimate the standing of Republicans,” said Silver, who has written repeatedly about the issue. “But there have been others, like 2000 and 2006, where they underestimated the standing of Democrats.”<sup>19</sup>

In a subsequent article, Silver examined Senate polls between 1990 and 2012 and found the GOP underperformed at the ballot box by less than one-half of 1 percent over what the polls had showed. “Democrats might argue that a Republican bias has been evident in recent years — even if it hasn’t been there over the longer term,” he wrote. “But the trend is nowhere close to statistically significant. Nor in the past has the direction of the bias

## It's Not the Last Straw for Iowa's Famous Poll

*GOP still embraces it, but critics say it's a platform for extremists.*

One of the nation's best-known political polls — the Ames Straw Poll, also called the Iowa Straw Poll — will be held again this summer after surviving an effort last year to scrap it.

First held in 1979, it is a poll of Republican presidential candidates taken every four years at an August fundraising event in Ames a year before the presidential election. It is open only to Hawkeye State residents regardless of whether they are registered Republicans. They cast ballots after participating candidates address the audience.<sup>1</sup>

The poll — run by the state GOP — has no effect on the actual primary process, but campaigns and the political news media have come to regard it as a critical test of a White House aspirant's organizational ability and grassroots support.

Some critics of the poll say it encourages extremist elements of the Republican Party, and some moderate Republicans have opted in the past not to take part in it. "Nationally, the Republican Party has been hijacked by extreme factions, making it difficult to appeal to the emerging voting majorities across the country, which is necessary to win the White House," said James Strohm, an Iowa State University political science lecturer. By appealing to the party's extremists, he said, the poll "makes it difficult for

moderate, electable candidates to prevail in the Iowa caucus and beyond."<sup>2</sup>

Iowa Republican Gov. Terry Branstad said last year the poll had outlived its usefulness and called for ending it. He and some other Republicans said they were concerned it could jeopardize the state's ability to hold the February 2016 political caucuses, the first regular voting event of the presidential campaign.<sup>3</sup>

In December, however, a majority of the Iowa GOP's Central Committee favored keeping the straw poll. They asked the Republican National Committee (RNC) whether the poll violates new RNC guidelines about holding voting events prior to the caucuses.

The RNC's general counsel, John Ryder, said in January the poll did not violate those guidelines and could continue as long as it isn't promoted as an "official event."<sup>4</sup> The Central Committee then voted unanimously to keep the poll.<sup>5</sup>

The poll's defenders contend it puts Iowa on the national political stage early and brings in money for the state party.

"The only thing that we need to scrap is the talk about there not being a straw poll," said Iowa U.S. Rep. Steve King, an influential figure in the state's GOP presidential politics.<sup>6</sup> In a subsequent letter to supporters before Ryder's decision

in the previous election cycle been a good way to predict what it will look like in the next cycle."<sup>20</sup>

Even if pollsters add more voters from one party to a sample, they say those additions are relatively small from a statistical standpoint.

"A sample that has 2 percentage points more in one survey, Democrat, and another state has a Republican a point more, this is all very much within what's called the error margin," said Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist Institute for Public Polling in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.<sup>21</sup>

Some polling experts cite a phenomenon known as "herding," or adjusting one's data to make it conform to the accepted norm in other election polls, especially if one's original results are radically different from other polls.

"Some pollsters think, 'It can be easier to be wrong with the crowd than it is to stick your neck out,'" says Stefan Hankin, a pollster for Obama's

2008 campaign who now runs his own polling company.

Last August, Silver's blog found possible examples of nontraditional, opt-in polls done over the Internet adjusting their results to reflect what the website described as higher-quality "gold-standard" polls. "None of this proves guilt, but it does raise the possibility some pollsters may be peeking at their neighbors' papers," it said.<sup>22</sup>

Other pollsters, however, say reputable members of their profession are far more interested in being accurate than in pleasing one party or the other or others in their industry. "We all want to get it right," Vercellotti says. "Conscientious survey researchers go through this pretty regularly when doing polls: You look at your estimates and ask yourself, 'Did I do everything the way I've been trained, and is the methodology sound?' If the answer is yes, you've got to put it out there."

Overall poll numbers can be affected when candidates publicly release private polling data only when it makes them look good, pollsters say, even if such so-called "outlier" polls don't reflect the true state of the race. Those polls can be folded into political forecasts based on an aggregation of multiple polls, skewing the overall result. "We don't release intentionally misleading surveys," says Greenberg, who has done polling for Democrats, including New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf and several congressional candidates. "If we get an outlier we will discourage our candidates from releasing it when it's probably not correct."

### ***Will Twitter and Facebook supplant conventional polling?***

Indiana University sociologist Fabio Rojas caused a stir in polling circles in 2013 when, in a *Washington Post* column titled "How Twitter Can Predict an Elec-

was announced, King said conservatives “should be outraged that establishment Republicans are working in secret to end the Ames Straw Poll.”<sup>7</sup>

Some candidates go to great lengths to try to influence the poll. In 2011, Texas Rep. Ron Paul paid \$31,000 to buy the most-desired booth space outside the convention center in which the vote took place.<sup>8</sup> He ended up narrowly losing to Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann.<sup>9</sup>

Strongly conservative Republicans usually have prevailed in the poll over moderates. In addition to Bachmann, poll winners on the far right who subsequently failed to gain political traction were television evangelist Pat Robertson in 1987 and Texas Sen. Phil Gramm in 1995.

A poor showing, on the other hand, has led some candidates to abandon their races. Former Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander dropped out after a fifth-place finish in 1999, while ex-Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty withdrew after taking third in 2011.

The poll involves only a minority of voters: about 17,000 Iowans voted in the straw poll in 2011, compared to the roughly 120,000 who took part in the Iowa caucuses. Republican Mitt Romney — the party’s eventual nominee — chose not to participate in the straw poll, believing he had more of a chance to have an impact elsewhere.

“I suspect many candidates in 2016 will make the choice Romney made in 2012,” said Phil Musser, a Republican political strategist who served as an adviser to Pawlenty.<sup>10</sup>

— **Chuck McCutcheon**

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Blake, “The Ames Straw Poll, Explained,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 8, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/3ragg49>.

<sup>2</sup> James Strohman, “Guest Column: Iowa’s GOP Should End Straw Poll,” *IowaStateDaily.com*, Sept. 18, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/kzjpbre>.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Lucey, “Branstad Seeks to End Iowa GOP Straw Poll,” *The Associated Press*, Dec. 15, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/k5y4twb>.

<sup>4</sup> James Hohmann, “RNC Gives Iowa GOP a Green Light for Straw Poll,” *Politico*, Jan. 8, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/nfwvrdo>.

<sup>5</sup> James Hohmann, “Iowa Republicans Vote to Continue Ames Straw Poll,” *Politico*, Jan. 9, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/mf3m2v7>.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Schultheis, “Will the Iowa Straw Poll Survive?” *National Journal*, Aug. 9, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/nutumvy>.

<sup>7</sup> “King: Some Republican leaders want to end Iowa Straw Poll to silence grassroots conservatives,” *Storm Lake Pilot Tribune*, Dec. 29, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/kofg5g6>.

<sup>8</sup> Blake, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> “Ames Straw Poll: Michele Bachmann Beats Ron Paul — By 152 Votes,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 13, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/lgg37mh>.

<sup>10</sup> Lucey, *op. cit.*

tion,” he boasted that social media eventually would put pollsters out of work.

“We no longer passively watch our leaders on television and register our opinions on Election Day. Modern politics happens when somebody comments on Twitter or links to a campaign through Facebook,” Rojas wrote. “In our hyper-networked world, anyone can say anything, and it can be read by millions. This new world will undermine the polling industry.”

Along with several colleagues, Rojas conducted a study concluding that Twitter discussions “are an unusually good predictor” of the outcome of U.S. House elections. Drawing on an archive of billions of randomly sampled tweets, they extracted more than 542,000 that mentioned a Democratic or Republican candidate in 2010. They found a “strong correlation” between a candidate’s “tweet share” and the final two-party vote, and said that share correctly pre-

dicted the winner in 404 of 435 races, a success rate of nearly 93 percent.<sup>23</sup>

Researchers at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst noted that in nine tossup Senate races in 2012, the candidate with the most Facebook followers won all but one.<sup>24</sup> In 2010, meanwhile, the candidate with the greater number of Facebook followers won in 71 percent of Senate elections, and in some cases the social-media site was found to be a better predictor of election results than how much money candidates raised and spent.<sup>25</sup>

However, those in the polling industry say the Indiana researchers’ work contained misguided assumptions. Political forecaster Rothenberg noted that just about 100 of the 406 House races in 2010 were seriously competitive.

“Since House re-election rates have been over 90 percent in 19 of the past 23 elections, you don’t need polls or tweet counts to predict the overwhelming

majority of race outcomes,” he said in a column. “In most cases, all you need to know is incumbency (or the district’s political bent) and the candidates’ parties to predict who will win.”<sup>26</sup>

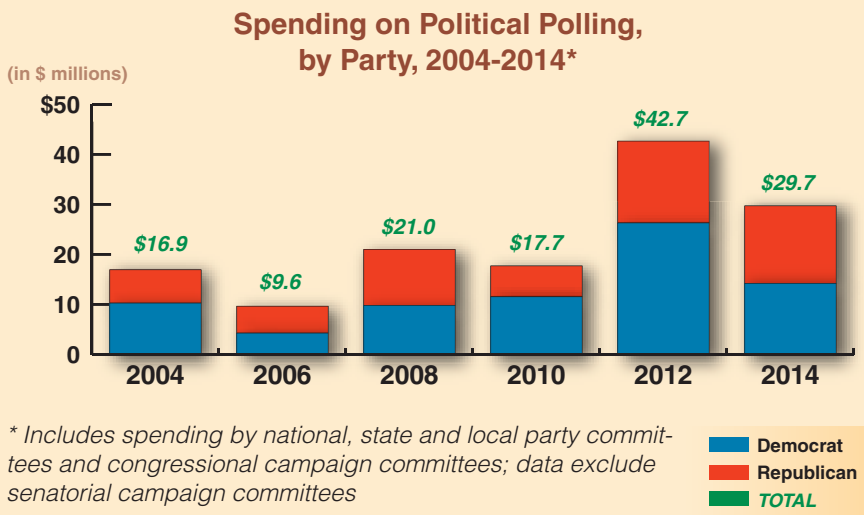
Steve Koczela, president of Boston’s MassINC Polling Group, agreed with Rothenberg. “Social media changes too fast to give me much confidence that models which worked in 2010 will work in 2016 or 2020,” he said.<sup>27</sup>

Facebook has had some major election failures. In 2010, Republicans Christine O’Donnell, Sharron Angle and Meg Whitman amassed many more online followers than their opponents did in the races for Delaware senator, Nevada senator and California governor, respectively, but still lost. And in those elections, Facebook and Twitter were less accurate at predicting who would win the support of younger voters.<sup>28</sup>

More recently, two potential 2016 White House aspirants, Democrat Hillary

## Spending on Political Polls Rising

Total spending on political polling by Republican and Democratic party committees has risen over the past decade during both presidential (2004, 2008, 2012) and midterm election years (2006, 2010, 2014). Party committees spent almost the same amount on polling in the 2014 midterms, but in the 2012 presidential year Democrats outspent their GOP counterparts by nearly \$10 million.



Source: Center for Responsive Politics

Rodham Clinton and Republican Ted Cruz, have dominated social media. Politico determined in December 2014 that over the previous three months, the former secretary of State and the Texas senator together accounted for 40 percent of Facebook discussions and 47 percent of mentions on Twitter among the 10 leading presidential possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

But even though Clinton has been the overwhelming favorite among Democrats for 2016, Cruz has trailed well behind several other Republican candidates in polls of voters' possible preferences, drawing between 4 percent and 8 percent in December surveys.<sup>30</sup>

A 2013 Pew study found that reaction on Twitter to major political events and policy moves "often differs a great deal from public opinion as measured by surveys." Twitter reaction was measured as more liberal than the public's after a federal court ruled that a California law banning same-sex marriage was

unconstitutional; but it was more conservative than the overall public reaction to Obama's State of the Union and second inaugural speeches.<sup>31</sup>

Although polling experts say social media remain too imprecise to supplant conventional polling, it could be helpful in augmenting such polling, they say. For example, they say, pollsters could learn from Twitter users what poll questions they should ask the broader public.

"I think the rise of social media presents an incredible opportunity for those of us who care about watching and measuring and understanding public opinion," *The Huffington Post's* Blumenthal says. "If you look at the way companies are turning to Twitter, they see it as an early-warning radar: When their best customers start complaining, they can watch it quickly. There are possibly analogous opportunities in political opinion research."

## Does the media's avid interest in polls hurt democracy?

Some in the political world say the news media's voracious appetite for polls distorts the political process. Much of the criticism centers on "horse race" journalism, which concentrates more on which candidates are trending up or down than on the issues of the campaign.

Polls are often the leading source of information in horse race articles, even though they usually lack context, observers say. "The problem is, journalists look at the poll and think that's the story, rather than going out and looking at what is really the story," says Susan Pinkus, a former *Los Angeles Times* polling director who is now a public opinion and strategic analysis consultant.

Tom Rosenstiel, founder and director of Columbia University's Project for Excellence in Journalism, agreed that current political journalism "has increased the tendency to allow polls to create a context for journalists to explain and organize other news — becoming the lens through which reporters see and order a more interpretative news environment." The dependence on horse race polls, he added, has "reinforced these tendencies, and further thinned the public's understanding toward who won and away from why."<sup>32</sup>

The Internet and social media, with their insatiable demands for new material, have made the situation worse, said Rothenberg, the election forecaster. "Stuff that's an hour old is ancient news," he lamented.

After winning a 2010 re-election race that many pollsters predicted he would lose, Nevada Democratic Sen. Harry Reid — then majority leader — admonished the media for what he called its overeagerness to report on "misleading" polls. Those polls "are all over the country, they are so unfair, and you just gobble them up — no matter where they came from," Reid told reporters. "You just run with them as if they are the finest piece of pastry in the world."<sup>33</sup>



In 2012, syndicated columnist Michael Gerson, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, also decried the attention given to Silver's *FiveThirtyEight* blog, which aggregated and analyzed numerous polls to produce a widely reported accurate forecast in that year's presidential race. "The most interesting and important thing about politics is not the measurement of opinion but the formation of opinion," Gerson wrote. "Public opinion is the product — the outcome — of politics; it is not the substance of politics."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the attention paid to his site, Silver said his use of polls to estimate a candidate's percentage-based chances of winning can conflict with the media's hunger for greater certainty. "What's challenging is that [*FiveThirtyEight*] goes against a lot of instincts that some journalists might have, where you want to put a ribbon on something and say, 'This candidate is going to win' or if you don't do that, then you say, 'Too close to call. We have no idea. It's 50-50,' " he said. "We don't exist in a 100-0 or 50-50 world. Most things in the world are 75-25 outcomes."<sup>35</sup>

Experts in polling with backgrounds in journalism say many reporters aren't trained in interpreting polls. "The news media have long indulged themselves in the lazy luxury of being both data-hungry and math-phobic," said Gary Langer, a former ABC News polling director who now runs his own survey research company.<sup>36</sup>

The National Council on Public Polls, an organization of leading survey research firms, has sought to help reporters better understand polls. It publishes an online guide, "20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask About Poll Results." The questions include, "How many people were interviewed for the survey?"<sup>37</sup>

Many news organizations do try to avoid reporting on polls that political partisans have sponsored. "Be wary of polls paid for by candidates or interest groups," says *The Associated Press Stylebook*, which many news organizations use as a guide.



Getty Images/Scott Olson

At a 2011 rally in Iowa, 2008 GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin colorfully disparaged surveys showing that many Americans regarded her unfavorably: "Polls? . . . They're for strippers and cross-country skiers," she declared. Polling has become entangled in the nation's prevailing polarized political climate, with politicians from both parties and the public questioning the validity of polls.

"Their release of poll results may be done selectively and is often a campaign tactic or publicity ploy."<sup>38</sup>

University of Wisconsin political scientist Charles Franklin, who studied publicly released horse-race polls from 2000 and 2002, found that polls identified as partisan by *National Journal's* "Hotline," a political website, tended to skew in favor of their preferred candidate.<sup>39</sup> But Greenberg, the Democratic pollster, says some reporters have taken the edict too far. "I've tried to have conversations with journalists who tell me, 'I can't trust anything you say because you're a partisan pollster,'" she says.

Pollsters applaud media outlets for often recognizing the importance of the sampling error margin, expressed as a plus-or-minus number of percentage points.

"What is less commonly known is that the margin of sampling error does not apply to the spread between the two candidates, but to the percentage point

estimates themselves," said Rutgers' Zukin, a former AAPOR president. As an example, he cited 2012 polls that showed Obama ahead of Romney, 47 percent to 44 percent, with an error margin of plus or minus 3 percentage points. "If applied to the 3-point spread, the 3-point margin of error would seem to say that Obama's lead might be as large as 6 (3 + 3), or as little as 0 (3 - 3)," he said. "But when correctly applied to the percentage point estimates for the candidates, Obama's support could be between 50 percent and 44 percent (47 plus or minus 3), and Romney's between 41 percent and 47 percent (44 plus or minus 3). Thus the range between the candidates could be from Obama having a 9-point lead (50-41) to Romney having a 3-point advantage (44-47). So, sampling error is generally much larger than it may seem, and is one of the major reasons why polls may differ, even when conducted around the same time."<sup>40</sup>

Experts commonly cite a tendency among the media to emphasize a



Getty Images/Erich Auerbach

*Polling pioneer George Gallup used what may have been the first scientific political survey in 1932 to predict that his mother-in-law, Ola Babcock Miller, would be elected Iowa's first female secretary of state. Three years later, he founded the Gallup Organization. In 1936, Gallup correctly predicted that Democratic incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt would beat Republican Alf Landon in the presidential election, after a magazine poll of 2 million mostly well-off Americans erroneously predicted Landon would unseat Roosevelt.*

candidate's leads in polls even when the lead is within or near the statistical margin of error. In a 2013 research paper, an American University student found several examples from the 2012 campaign, including a report on NBC "Nightly News" in October that showed Romney up by 4 percentage points. The network put onscreen, but did not make clear verbally, that the margin of error was plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.<sup>41</sup>

Certain elements of the media, however, have become extremely sophisticated in explaining polls to the public, say some pollsters. "You have a lot of people who are trying to systematically evaluate the value of various [polling] enterprises," says Frank Newport, editor in chief at Gallup.

Newport singled out *The New York Times'* online "Upshot" column, which in 2014 allowed readers to use its computer model to make their own statistical forecasts in Senate races.<sup>42</sup> Newport also cited *The Washington Post* and Blumenthal's site on *The Huffington Post*, which dissect various polls and discuss what's happening in the industry.

Langer says the media shouldn't be singled out for criticism for being inordinately poll-hungry. He cites the public relations industry, "which has discovered that polling is the new PR." Public relations companies say polls can highlight the importance of a product or service and that news releases featuring polls stand out from other releases.<sup>43</sup>

Even horse race coverage has its defenders, who say it can be valuable when

done properly. Greg Marx, an associate editor at *Columbia Journalism Review*, said it is especially useful at the outset of a presidential campaign's primary election season, when parties are trying to assess their most-electable aspirants.

"If reporters wait for the voters to weigh in to take stock of who's ahead, they'll have missed much of the story," he said.<sup>44</sup> ■

## BACKGROUND

### Early Polling

Many politicians have long contended that political and legislative success springs from an ability to see and implement the public's wishes. "What I want to get done is what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly," President Abraham Lincoln said.<sup>45</sup>

Efforts to discern what people wanted began decades before Lincoln took office. The first public opinion poll was an 1824 *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* survey that correctly predicted Andrew Jackson would defeat John Quincy Adams. However, because neither candidate won a majority of the electoral vote, the election went to the House of Representatives, which picked Adams.<sup>46</sup>

Newspapers continued to supplement their election coverage by interviewing voters as they left polling places. By the end of the 19th century, such "straw polls" were a feature of local as well as national papers and magazines.<sup>47</sup> Some theorize the term came from holding up a stalk of straw to see which way the wind blew it.<sup>48</sup>

By the 20th century, more sophisticated methods emerged. In 1932, advertising agency employee George Gallup used a new market research technique to predict the election of his mother-in-

*Continued on p. 132*

# Chronology

**1800s** *Polls emerge to measure political opinions.*

**1824**

In first opinion poll, Harrisburg Pennsylvanian correctly predicts presidential candidate Andrew Jackson's defeat of John Quincy Adams, but the House of Representatives elects Adams after neither candidate wins majority of electoral vote.

**1930s-1950s**  
*Scientific polls become popular but have shortcomings.*

**1932**

Advertising-agency employee George Gallup predicts his mother-in-law's election as Iowa's first female secretary of state in what the company he later started says may have been the first scientific political survey.

**1935**

Gallup founds the American Institute of Public Opinion.

**1936**

*Literary Digest* polls 2 million people but incorrectly predicts that Republican Alf Landon would beat Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt; Gallup correctly calls the election for Roosevelt after conducting his own, more representative poll of 50,000 people.

**1941**

National Opinion Research Center, a private nonprofit group, is founded as the first noncommercial polling agency.

**1947**

American Association for Public Opinion Research founded as professional pollsters' organization.

**1948**

With polls showing Thomas Dewey leading President Harry S. Truman in the presidential election, pollsters stop conducting interviews weeks or months before vote and fail to forecast Truman's victory.

**1960s-1980s**  
*Political polls and pollsters gain higher profile.*

**1960**

Democratic presidential contender John F. Kennedy relies heavily on poll data to help him defeat Republican Richard M. Nixon.

**1968**

Pollster Robert Teeter becomes adviser to Nixon and later to Republican presidential candidate George H. W. Bush.

**1976**

Democratic pollster Patrick Caddell urges presidential candidate Jimmy Carter to focus on creating an image of trustworthiness to counter post-Watergate skepticism of politicians.

**1981**

Richard Wirthlin joins Reagan administration as first semi-official staff pollster.

**1990s-2000s**  
*Major polling mistakes draw criticism of the industry.*

**1996**

Three television networks incorrectly cite exit polls to project a third-place finish for Republican Bob Dole in Arizona's presidential primary. Followers of Republican presidential

candidate Patrick Buchanan are later revealed to have tried to influence exit pollsters.

**2000**

Voter News Service uses exit poll data to project — before Florida's polls close — that Vice President Al Gore would win that state and the presidency. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately declares George W. Bush the winner.

**2004**

Gallup poll shows White House contender John Kerry trailing President George W. Bush, leading the left-wing group MoveOn.org to blast Gallup's "flawed methodology."

**2007**

Statistician and poll aggregator Nate Silver issues predictions about the upcoming presidential election and subsequently founds the influential *FiveThirtyEight.com* blog, which is picked up by *The New York Times* before moving to ESPN.

**2008**

Pre-primary polls in New Hampshire put presidential contender Barack Obama ahead of Hillary Rodham Clinton, but she wins easily. Experts blame an overstatement of support for Obama among whites.

**2012**

Alleging that polls are stacked against them, Republicans heavily criticize Silver for concluding that Democrat Obama's statistical chances of election are greater than Republican rival Mitt Romney's.

**2014**

Five months after being rebuked for failing to predict the GOP primary loss of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., pollsters draw even more criticism for miscalling races in several states and underestimating the GOP's strength at the polls.

## 'Push Polls' Cast Negative Light on Candidates

*Polling groups condemn the practice as manipulative.*

They might seem legitimate, but so-called push polls aren't actually polls — they're tools of parties and political activists willing to engage in dirty tricks. In a push poll, members of the public respond to what they believe is a valid telephone-based survey, only to be asked leading and negative questions about a politician. The intent is to try to influence opinion rather than to gather information.

Major polling organizations strongly condemn the practice, including the National Council on Public Polls, a coalition of those groups, which calls push polling “political manipulation trying to hide behind the smokescreen of a public opinion survey.”<sup>1</sup>

A prominent example of push polling came in a 2013 special U.S. House election in which South Carolina Republican Mark Sanford — a former governor whose career had been derailed by revelations of an extramarital affair — was running against Democrat Elizabeth Colbert Busch, a sister of television humorist Stephen Colbert. A group supporting Sanford, called SSI Polling, reportedly conducted a poll in which questions included: “What would you think of Elizabeth Colbert Busch if I told you she had an abortion?” and “What would you think of Elizabeth Colbert Busch if she had done jail time?” and “What would you think of Elizabeth Colbert Busch if I told you she was caught running up a charge account bill?”<sup>2</sup>

None of the accusations was true. Sanford — whose campaign denied knowledge of the calling effort — won the election less than a week after the media and political blogs reported on the calls.<sup>3</sup>

According to the liberal website *ThinkProgress.org*, the Connecticut market research firm SSI said it had been involved in placing calls to South Carolina voters with similar content on behalf of an unidentified client. A company official said her version of the call script did not contain any questions about abortion but that other versions of the script could have been used.

South Carolina was the scene of another push-polling controversy during the 2000 presidential campaign. Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain and his aides complained voters received calls describing McCain as a “cheat and a liar and a fraud” and intimating the untrue accusation that he had fathered an illegitimate child. Karl Rove, the political strategist for McCain's rival, George W. Bush, was widely cited by Democrats and journalists as being behind the calls. Rove has adamantly denied the charge.<sup>4</sup>

But Republicans are not the only ones who have been

accused of using pushing polls. In the 2014 race for Suffolk County, N.Y., comptroller, Republican candidate John Kennedy accused the campaign of his Democratic opponent, James Gaughran, of conducting a push poll that misrepresented the work Kennedy's wife, Leslie, did as his legislative aide. He said the Gaughran campaign portrayed it as sheer nepotism, when in fact she put in long hours and was well regarded among constituents.<sup>5</sup>

Gaughran defended his campaign's efforts, saying Leslie Kennedy's work was a legitimate campaign issue.<sup>6</sup> But Gaughran lost, and Republicans said it was because voters recognized the attacks as misguided.<sup>7</sup>

Many states have banned the practice. But in October, New Hampshire's Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that said state limits on push polls do not apply to federal candidates. The case stemmed from a 2010 claim by the state attorney general's office that Republican Rep. Charlie Bass' campaign had asked negative questions about Bass' Democratic rival, Ann McLane Kuster.<sup>8</sup>

In the U.S. Senate, outgoing Alaska Democrat Mark Begich in November introduced an unsuccessful bill to expand the national Do Not Call Registry, which allows consumers to block telemarketers' calls, to ban push polls.<sup>9</sup>

— *Chuck McCutcheon*

<sup>1</sup> Sheldon R. Gawiser and G. Evans Witt, “20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask About Poll Results,” National Council on Public Polls, undated, <http://tinyurl.com/mj52bbg>.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Keyes and Adam Peck, “Dirty Tricks: Mysterious Conservative Group Sending Out Push Polls In South Carolina Special Election,” *ThinkProgress.org*, May 2, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/br48ep6>.

<sup>3</sup> “Colbert Busch ‘Abortion’ Push Poll Rocks SC-1,” *FitsNews.com*, May 1, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/nbuqslr>.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rove, *Courage and Consequence: My Life as a Conservative in the Fight* (2010), p. 151, <http://tinyurl.com/mycsgtm>.

<sup>5</sup> Rick Brand, “Suffolk's 12th LD: Kennedy blasts ‘lying’ in Democratic message,” *Newsday*, Sept. 1, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/lw8udb3>.

<sup>6</sup> David M. Schwartz, “Legis. John Kennedy's hiring of wife an issue in Suffolk comptroller race,” *Newsday*, Oct. 13, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/mtfo4rt>.

<sup>7</sup> Rick Brand, “Kennedy's Big Boost at Home,” *Newsday*, Nov. 9, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> David Brooks, “State Supreme Court says push polls for federal candidates are OK, but not for state offices,” *The Telegraph* (Nashua, N.H.), Oct. 16, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/o3mr62z>.

<sup>9</sup> “Begich Introduces Bill to Expand ‘Do Not Call Registry’ and Protect Alaskans’ Privacy,” *Alaska Business Monthly*, November 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/q9f6527>.

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law, Ola Babcock Miller, as Iowa's first female secretary of state in what the company he started says may have been the first scientific political survey.<sup>49</sup>

Three years later, Gallup founded

the American Institute of Public Opinion in Princeton, N.J., and began writing a syndicated column, “America Speaks.” The first column was about government spending: 60 percent of respondents said it was “too great,” while 31 percent

said it was “about right” and 9 percent said “too little.”<sup>50</sup>

Polls played a key role in the 1936 presidential election. *Literary Digest* polled 2 million Americans — mostly well-off people who read magazines,

owned cars or had phones — and predicted erroneously that Republican Alf Landon would beat Democratic incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt. Gallup's own poll of 50,000 people, which was more representative of the overall population, said Roosevelt would win. Roosevelt's victory helped establish Gallup as the nation's leading polling figure.<sup>51</sup>

"My dad thought that polls were absolutely vital to a democracy," said George Gallup Jr., who followed his father into the business. "He felt that polls were extremely important because it removed the power from lobbying groups and from smoke-filled rooms and let the public into the act."<sup>52</sup>

By 1941, the National Opinion Research Center became the first noncommercial polling organization. A private, nonprofit group, it is now based at the University of Chicago and receives funding from other nonprofits as well as government agencies. Six years later, the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) was founded as the professional organization of pollsters.<sup>53</sup>

## Dewey Vs. Truman

The timing of polls was a major issue in the 1948 presidential election between President Harry S. Truman and Republican Gov. Thomas Dewey of New York. The Roper poll, founded by pollster Elmo Roper just after World War II, discontinued surveys in September, while Gallup stopped a few weeks before Election Day. Both predicted a Dewey win, ignoring the possibility that people might change their minds as the election drew closer.

But Truman prevailed, and the photo of him holding up a *Chicago Tribune* mistakenly contending he had lost has become an iconic image. Gallup and other pollsters publicly apologized and refined their methods, including polling closer to Election Day.<sup>54</sup>

Democrat John F. Kennedy relied heavily on polls in winning the pres-

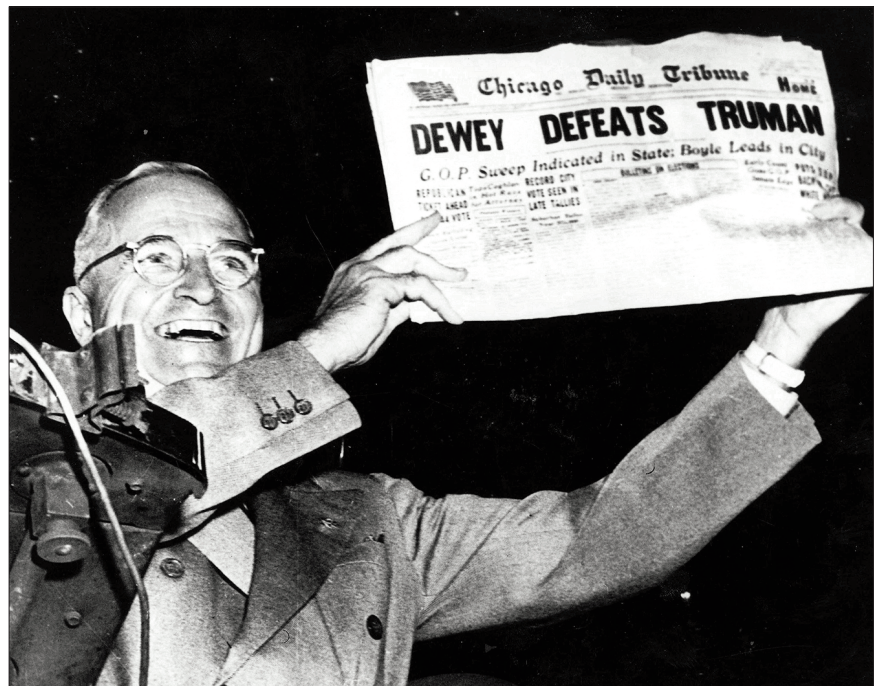
idency in 1960, setting the stage for subsequent White House contenders. Pollsters eventually began acquiring reputations as savvy strategists, providing advice on what issues were popular or unpopular.

In early 1976, with the country reeling from the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, pollster Patrick Caddell became a trusted confidante of Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter. After Carter's election, Caddell used his data to advise Carter on issues such as the 1977 treaty to cede U.S. control of the Panama Canal to Panama.<sup>55</sup>

spirit in our country." The speech led Republicans to depict Carter in the 1980 campaign as a pessimist in contrast with Republican Ronald Reagan.<sup>56</sup>

## Exit Polling

Polls caused controversy on Election Day that year. By then, news media "exit polls" of voters leaving polling places had become standard. But NBC News projected Reagan's victory, based on such polling, nearly three hours before the polls had closed on the West Coast, fueling speculation about



Getty Images/Popperfoto

*President Harry S. Truman gleefully holds up the iconic Chicago Tribune headline mistakenly announcing his 1948 re-election defeat by New York Gov. Thomas Dewey. Major pollsters had discontinued their surveys weeks before Election Day, leading to the paper's mistake. After that, pollsters continued surveying potential voters until closer to Election Day to account for those who changed their minds at the last minute.*

Two years later, Caddell implored Carter to give a speech addressing the country's "crisis of confidence" stemming from soaring inflation, oil prices and other factors. In Carter's televised address on July 15, 1979, he said: "The solution of our energy crisis can also help us to conquer the crisis of the

whether the premature news of Reagan's victory discouraged many would-be voters from casting ballots.

News organizations subsequently agreed not to project any voting results in a state until its polls had closed. Nevertheless, media mistakes involving exit polls continued.

In 1996, three television networks — CNN, CBS and ABC — cited exit polls to project a third-place finish for Republican Bob Dole in Arizona’s GOP presidential primary, which pundits predicted would deal a serious blow to the Kansas senator’s campaign. Dole actually came in second and later ended up winning the GOP nomination. It

Tom Bradley’s 1982 gubernatorial bid in California, in which the black Democrat led in pre-election polls only to lose to Republican George Deukmejian, who is white.<sup>58</sup>

One of the biggest polling miscues arose in the 2000 presidential election. Voter News Service, the polling statistics group that had worked on the

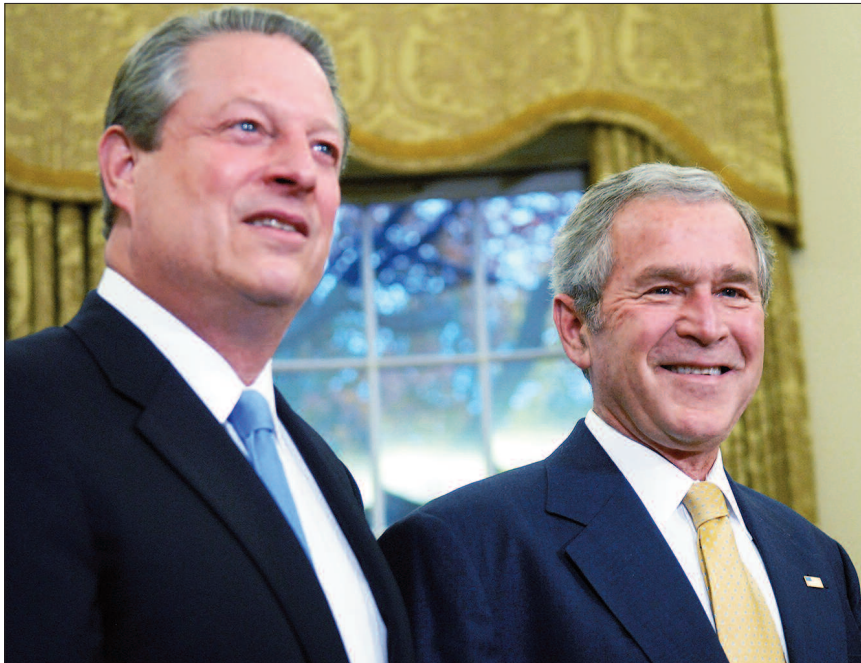
As Washington lobbying boomed in the 1990s and 2000s, so did the use of polls by partisan interest groups to support their policy positions. Such groups often commissioned a poll and then used the findings to publicly frame the issues, privately help shape lobbying tactics or both. The infamous “Harry and Louise” television ads in 1994, which were seen as helping turn public sentiment against President Bill Clinton’s health-care reform proposal, were shaped by Republican polls. The Health Insurance Association of America, an industry lobby group, ran the ads depicting a middle-class married couple worrying about rising health care costs and bureaucracy.

“Organized interests that can afford to conduct such surveys have a leg up on lobbying legislators, for the polls give them critical policy and political data that are both precise (as to numbers) and targeted (state or district),” University of Kansas political scientist Burdett Loomis said in a 2003 paper. “Especially when lawmakers are relatively indifferent on an issue, such information can be powerful.”<sup>61</sup>

During the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries, a new election-polling mistake surfaced. Pre-primary polls in New Hampshire put then-Illinois Sen. Obama ahead of New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton by an average margin of more than 8 percent. But Clinton prevailed easily.

Andrew Kohut, then president of the Pew Research Center, blamed the discrepancy on the “long-standing pattern of pre-election polls overstating support for black candidates among white voters, particularly white voters who are poor.”<sup>62</sup> A Stanford University researcher later discovered a twist on the Bradley effect, in which white poll respondents were more likely to say they would back Obama if the person interviewing them was thought to be black.<sup>63</sup>

The Supreme Court’s landmark *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision in 2010, which abolished many federal restrictions on campaign



Getty Images/Kevin Dietsch

*Polling mistakes in Florida in the 2000 presidential election added to confusion over the outcome of the contest between Democratic Vice President Al Gore and former Gov. George W. Bush of Texas. The polling organization Voter News Service projected, before Florida’s polls closed, that Gore would win that state, giving him enough electoral votes to become president. Six hours later, the service declared Bush the winner, then later shifted again and declared the race too close to call. The Supreme Court ultimately declared Bush the winner of the state — and the presidency.*

later emerged that followers of Dole’s opponent, Republican Pat Buchanan, had tried to influence exit pollsters by actively seeking them out in order to shape the speculation in favor of their candidate.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, the increasing entry of African-Americans into politics gave rise to a phenomenon known as the “Bradley effect” — the tendency of voters to tell pollsters that they are undecided or are likely to vote for a black candidate, but to actually vote for a white opponent. The term came from Los Angeles Mayor

earlier Arizona primary, used exit poll data to project, before Florida’s polls closed, that Democratic Vice President Al Gore would win that state, giving him enough electoral votes to become president. Six hours later, the service declared Bush the winner, then later shifted again and declared the race too close to call.<sup>59</sup> The issue of who won Florida went to the Supreme Court, which ultimately declared Bush the winner of the state, and thus the presidency. Voter News Service was replaced with a new outfit in 2004.<sup>60</sup>

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spending, introduced a new entity — so-called “super PACs,” which can make unlimited donations as long as the money does not go directly to candidates.<sup>64</sup> Super PACs for both parties began commissioning their own polls, which drew media attention. For example, two months before Kentucky’s 2014 Senate GOP primary, a super PAC supporting Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky released a poll showing that he held a nearly 40-point lead over challenger Matt Bevin.<sup>65</sup>

In the 2012 presidential race, *FiveThirtyEight* blogger Silver became a target of Republicans’ hostility. Even when polls showed Romney ahead of Obama, Silver issued forecasts based on polls showing Obama’s statistical chances of winning remained greater. Silver ended up precisely predicting that the president would receive 332 Electoral College votes, 62 more than he needed to win.<sup>66</sup>

Heading into Election Day, Romney’s private polls showed him ahead in Florida, Colorado and other key battleground states, but he won just one — North Carolina.<sup>67</sup> In a subsequent post-election study, the Republican National Committee’s Growth and Opportunity Project — a panel of key party officials — said 70 percent of the GOP pollsters it surveyed agreed their party’s official polling was inferior to the Democratic Party’s.

A significant problem was the GOP-financed pollsters’ failure to include adequate numbers of Hispanics and younger voters. More than one-third of GOP pollsters said Republican surveys that failed to properly model voter turnout were a “very important” factor in the inaccuracy.<sup>68</sup>

But it wasn’t just the GOP’s internal polls that proved wanting. Gallup’s Election Day survey showed Romney ahead of Obama, 49 percent to 48 percent. Obama won, 51 percent to 47 percent. Newport, the Gallup editor, later cited several problems, including shortcomings in the company’s model of likely voters and the practice of finding survey

respondents by calling only publicly listed landlines. To accurately reflect the voting public, Newport said, Gallup should also have called voters with unlisted numbers.<sup>69</sup>

Other polls by organizations unaffiliated with a political party have fared better. McGhee, of the Public Policy Institute of California, examined publicly available Senate polls conducted one week before Election Day from 1990 to 2012. He found that both the volume of polls, and their accuracy, had markedly increased.

Pollsters’ mistakes have been magnified because they have often come in high-profile elections. In the 2013 Virginia governor’s race, regarded as a key barometer for 2014’s elections, most pollsters did not adequately gauge Republican Ken Cuccinelli’s support. Although Cuccinelli had trailed in pre-election polls by double digits, he lost to Democrat Terry McAuliffe by fewer than 3 percentage points.<sup>70</sup>

Seven months later, Cantor’s primary loss in Virginia to college professor Dave Brat sparked massive criticism of polls. Although several pre-election polls were wrong, the one drawing the most attention was by Republican pollster John McLaughlin that had shown Cantor, the House majority leader, up by 34 percentage points. Cantor lost by double digits, and McLaughlin blamed a variety of factors, including higher-than-expected voter turnout and harsh attacks late in the campaign on Cantor’s stance on immigration.<sup>71</sup>

But some experts wondered if other factors were at work. GOP pollster and political consultant Frank Luntz called the miscue “a mind-blowing modern-day ‘Dewey Beats Truman’ moment” and said polls do not always provide all of the information needed to gauge an election.

“Without qualitative insight — talking with voters face to face to judge their mood, emotion, intensity and opinion — polls can be inconsequential, and occasionally wrong,” Luntz said.<sup>72</sup>

High-profile misjudgments continued

in the fall. In Kansas, many pre-election polls showed Gov. Sam Brownback and Sen. Pat Roberts in serious electoral trouble, but both Republicans won easily. Chapman Rackaway, a political scientist at Fort Hays State University, blamed herding. Pollsters “want to be close to each other, so if they’re wrong, they’re no more wrong than everybody else,” he said.

Brownback’s campaign manager, Mark Dugan, said public polls — as opposed to his campaign’s internal surveys — underestimated how many Republicans would vote.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to erring in the Virginia Senate and Georgia Senate and governor’s races, many pollsters failed to foresee the defeat of Democratic Sen. Kay Hagan in North Carolina. And even polls that predicted wins for GOP Senate candidates Tom Cotton in Arkansas and Kentucky’s McConnell failed to anticipate how decisive their victories would be. Republicans ended up with 55 seats to regain control of the Senate.

“The performance of the [pollsters’ forecasting] models was strikingly similar,” wrote *The New Yorker’s* John Cassidy. “On the eve of the election, all of them indicated that it was unlikely that the Republicans would get 54 seats or more. Several of them suggested that the probability of this happening was less than 25 percent.”<sup>74</sup>

One factor, pollsters agree, is that polling is far easier to do during presidential-election years than in midterm-election years because in a presidential year, more of the electorate is engaged and shows up to vote. That makes it easier to predict their behavior and obtain their responses ahead of time. “The Midterm Polling Curse struck us all” in 2014, said polling forecaster Sam Wang.<sup>75</sup>

Pollsters also said inaccurate polls drowned out more accurate ones in their forecasting models. The most accurate polls, however, did not depend solely on aggregating poll data but also made their own adjustments. They included *The Washington Post’s* Election Lab and *FiveThirtyEight.com*.<sup>76</sup>

But pollsters pushed back against criticism that the election was a disaster. *FiveThirtyEight.com* asked 17 prominent pollsters, “In light of Tuesday’s results, did election polls do well this year at depicting the electorate’s views?” Ten answered yes; six said no; one said, “Some did and some didn’t.”<sup>77</sup>

In a later statistical analysis, McGhee, of California’s Public Policy Institute, said the 2014 polls weren’t quite as on-target as in prior years. But he said: “We are still clearly in a world of better accuracy.”<sup>78</sup> ■

## CURRENT SITUATION

### Presidential Race

Pollsters are expected to play a prominent role in the 2016 presidential election. Clinton, the consensus Democratic frontrunner, in January hired Joel Benenson, whose polling for Obama was considered a key factor behind his two White House wins.

In her failed 2008 race for the presidency, Clinton had relied on Democratic pollster Mark Penn, whom she ultimately replaced when she fell behind and tried to shake up her campaign. Obama used Benenson as part of a team of pollsters, an approach Clinton is said to be interested in duplicating if she decides to run.<sup>79</sup>

Pollsters are at odds over whether a controversial decision by New Jersey Republican Gov. Chris Christie’s administration last year to close a portion of the George Washington Bridge for political reasons is hurting his possible presidential bid. On the Republican side, Adam Geller, a pollster for Christie, made news in December when he asserted that the controversy — dubbed “Bridgagate” — was not hurting the New Jersey

governor, who has yet to formally announce his White House plans.

“It seems to me that in New Jersey, people are over the Bridgagate scandal, and nationally, it is not even on the public’s radar,” Geller said in a speech. “I’m not speaking to whatever the future may hold.”<sup>80</sup> However, a Quinnipiac University poll in January showed Christie with a rating of 46 percent approval/48 percent disapproval among New Jersey voters. “It’s his worst score in almost four years, so Bridgagate continues to harass Gov. Christie,” said Maurice Carroll, the Quinnipiac poll’s assistant director.<sup>81</sup>

Another potential GOP candidate, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, in November downplayed a poll of Wisconsin voters showing that only 42 percent of respondents said he would make a good president. That figure was 4 percentage points below that of Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, the 2012 GOP vice-presidential nominee. “In the end, any poll right now is ridiculous,” Walker said. “You look over the past four or five elections, people who poll high at the beginning are not the people who end up being the nominees.”<sup>82</sup>

However, the fact-checking website PolitiFact.com looked at past early presidential election polls and found that five contenders who did well at the time did become the nominee. It rated Walker’s assertion “Mostly False.”<sup>83</sup>

### Internet Polling

How much attention should be accorded to polls using nonprobability sampling — such as opt-in surveys conducted on the Internet — is one of the biggest ongoing debates in the polling world.

“Our future may involve methodologies where your gut says, ‘This’ll work,’ but the mathematical foundation of probability sampling isn’t there,” Western New England’s Vercellotti says. “You’re seeing really spirited debates about that.”

One such debate occurred when CBS News and *The New York Times* announced last year they would begin using YouGov panels of voters who express their opinions online as part of their election poll models. YouGov, a United Kingdom-based survey research firm, uses the online panels as an alternative to traditional telephone-based surveys. (See sidebar, p. 132.)

David Leonhardt, editor of *The Times*’ “Upshot” site, said the new partnership would result in “a significantly expanded panel. . . . You get a more accurate picture of the horse race when you look at it from several angles.”<sup>84</sup>

However, pollsters who prefer phone polling were sharply critical. Link, from the American Association for Political Opinion Research (AAPOR), took the unusual step of issuing a public statement saying YouGov’s survey methods have “little grounding in theory” and questioning whether the news organizations would adequately disclose their methodologies.<sup>85</sup>

In response, Andrew Gelman — a political scientist and director of Columbia University’s Applied Statistics Center who says Internet polls have merit — wrote a sarcastic post on a blog with the headline: “President of American Association of Buggy-Whip Manufacturers takes a strong stand against internal combustion engine, argues that the so-called ‘automobile’ has ‘little grounding in theory’ and that ‘results can vary widely based on the particular fuel that is used.’”<sup>86</sup>

Link told *CQ Researcher* in January he did not intend to criticize YouGov and that his statement “was not as effective or efficient as it should have been. With the issues it raised, the silver lining was that it should generate a dialogue.”

An AAPOR task force on nonprobability sampling issued a report in 2013 concluding that no single consensus method exists for conducting it.<sup>87</sup> But Link says his organization’s annual conference, scheduled for May, will include

*Continued on p. 138*



# At Issue:

## Can “nonprobability” polls reliably reflect public opinion?



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Every public opinion poll conducted during the 2014 midterm elections used a nonprobability sample of voters. Some pollsters claim to have probability samples because they used random digit dialing (RDD), but they're confusing a probability sample of phone numbers with a probability sample of voters. These are not the same thing.

In probability sampling, every voter has a known positive probability of selection. At one time, RDD did provide something close to a probability sample. Before the era of cellphones, answering machines and telemarketing, most households had a single landline telephone. When it rang, they answered it and took surveys. Nowadays, people have multiple phone numbers, screen their calls and — if reachable — aren't willing to take surveys. Response rates are often under 10 percent, so that the probability that a voter ends up in a poll isn't the probability that their phone number was selected.

If you don't know the probability of selection, then it's not a probability sample, and you should stop pretending that you have a probability sample. We already weight our data to match census demographics because some hard-to-get categories of voters are underrepresented in phone samples by a factor of 10 or more.

This is where so-called nonprobability methods and Internet panels have advantages. Large panels of respondents have been recruited to take surveys. Instead of randomly selecting panelists for a poll, they are chosen to be representative of the population. If the panel is large and diverse enough, it's feasible to obtain a sample with smaller skews than an RDD phone sample. This means that less weighting is needed to correct for skews in the sample.

The theoretical basis for making inferences from a nonprobability panel and for weighting an RDD phone are identical, since both rely upon adjusting the sample for respondent characteristics. How well they work is an empirical matter.

At YouGov, we've used an online opt-in panel to produce estimates for nearly every Senate and governor election as well as presidential vote by state for almost a decade. The average error for Senate races has ranged from 1.8 percent in 2010 to 3.5 percent in 2008 (with 2014 being 3.2 percent). State level presidential estimates had an average error of 1.3 percent in 2012 and 2.5 percent in 2008. These error rates were about the same or slightly less than phone samples in the same states over the same period.



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We cannot be confident that nonprobability samples validly and reliably represent broader public attitudes. They fall short in the two key tests of scientific inquiry: theoreticism and empiricism. In both, by contrast, probability-based methods excel.

Probability-based survey research — conducted, for example, via random-sample telephone or face-to-face interviews — is based on probability theory, which provides grounds for inference to a larger population. The theory allows for random nonresponse, a reason that probability-based samples, even with low response rates, are consistently accurate when measured against relevant benchmarks.

Nonprobability sampling has made a comeback of late with the advent of the Internet and social media, offering fast, large-scale, inexpensive data collection — but it lacks a theoretical basis. Most prominent are opt-in Internet panels, in which individuals sign up to click through questionnaires online in exchange for cash and gifts. There's evidence of a cottage industry of professional respondents, signing up for multiple panels, perhaps under assumed identities, to increase their prize-winning opportunities.

Above and beyond validation of identities, quality control often is lacking. Full disclosure is rare, including details of sampling, sample weighting and respondent selection procedures. And such surveys often make unsupported claims, including the assertion of a calculable margin of sampling error.

Empirically, academic studies have suggested that such surveys produce inconsistent results in terms of accuracy, time trends and relationships among variables. In 2010, the American Association for Public Opinion Research concluded, “There currently is no generally accepted theoretical basis from which to claim that survey results using samples from nonprobability online panels are projectable to the general population.” It advised researchers to “avoid nonprobability online panels when one of the research objectives is to accurately estimate population values.”

Attempted quantitative analysis of social media also raises concerns. These vast data sets may include, for example, multiple postings (and repostings), created via orchestrated campaigns using computerized “bots.” Valid demographic information — even nationality — generally is unavailable. Selecting relevant posts and accurately discerning their meaning are highly challenging given the use of slang, abbreviations, acronyms, irony and sarcasm. And, again, a theory to support inference is absent.

All survey methods — probability and nonprobability alike — should be subjected to ongoing, independent evaluation. For this to be accomplished, full disclosure of relevant information on sampling, weighting and data production is essential.

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“an entire focus” on nonprobability sampling, “so we can all come together and learn from each other and learn from the new techniques as well as learn from the new methodologies.”

Similar efforts already are underway.

voting population at large. *The New York Times* in October 2014 began running articles based on the panel’s work.<sup>89</sup>

The RAND panel’s final pre-election result in 2012 was closer to the election’s actual outcome than that of many other polls.<sup>90</sup>

“There are some robopolls out there with the recorded voice of a real person asking the question — there have been experiments with avatars administering polls to you,” Keeter said. “But there are issues here, too. What’s the accent? Does she remind you of any old girlfriend or an ex-wife, and does that have an effect on your answers? For sensitive questions like drug use, are people more or less likely to tell Cortana the truth? This is why we need experiments like this.”<sup>91</sup>

The public’s disdain for robopolls can affect their quality. Two researchers compared robopolls of a president’s job-approval rating with live calling and Internet surveys. Although they found phone calls and online surveys produced “quite similar” results, they found that robopolls had far lower participation rates resulting in “a significantly higher estimate of the disapproval rate of the president and a significantly lower estimate for ‘no opinion.’ ”<sup>92</sup>

The Marketing Research Association, the trade group representing the opinion and marketing research industries, asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in January to consider relaxing federal regulations to allow survey, opinion and marketing research calls to cell phones.

Existing regulations that forbid the use of automatic dialers or “robocallers” to cell phones limit cell phone polling, pollsters say. Currently, only human beings can call cell phones. The association contended in comments to the FCC that the rules “unnecessarily and perhaps unintentionally limit researchers’ ability to gather unbiased, reliable and accurate public views that cost-effectively represent all demographics.”<sup>93</sup>

Consumer groups, however, are expected to continue their ardent opposition to allowing robocalls on cell phones. They say such calls are an intrusion and could open the door to unwanted sales and marketing pitches.<sup>94</sup>

Many states regulate robocalls, primarily by restricting when they can occur. Several specifically ban polling-



Getty Images/Lisa Lake

*Pollsters are expected to play a prominent role in the 2016 presidential election. Former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the consensus frontrunner for the Democratic nomination – if she decides to run – in January hired Joel Benenson, whose polling was considered a key factor in Barack Obama’s two white House wins.*

In November, the online survey company SurveyMonkey announced it would begin collaborating with the research organization Westat and the Pew Research Center. The groups will study the science behind adjustments and weighting used with nonprobability Internet sampling along with several other sampling methods. “Having no singular framework for nonprobability sampling is limiting the insights market researchers and opinion pollsters can deliver,” said Mike Brick, a Westat senior statistician.<sup>88</sup>

Some pollsters say finding and retaining online panels of voters who truly reflect the public at large can be extremely expensive and time-consuming, but they agree it merits further investigation.

Since 2003, the RAND Corp., a non-profit research organization, has used such a panel that seeks to replicate the

## Robot Interviewers

Many in the polling industry are watching software giant Microsoft Corp., which drew attention in September when it started an online survey website called Microsoft Prediction Lab, in which users can submit predictions on politics and other subjects.

The company said Cortana, the digitally based smartphone assistant similar to Apple’s Siri, eventually could conduct the interviews as an alternative to human questioners used in phone polling.

Scott Keeter, the Pew Research Center’s director of survey research, applauded the company’s work. He said replacing a human pollster with a digital one was not entirely unprecedented, but cautioned that it needs ample study.

related calls at certain times of the day or night.<sup>95</sup>

Bill McInturff, partner and cofounder of Public Opinion Strategies, a survey research firm in Alexandria, Va., is among those exploring the potential of cell phone use. His firm conducted the first cell-only national political survey in 2013, and he says cell polls can help illuminate the views of younger voters, who are avid cell phone users.

Though McInturff says a cell-only survey isn't representative of the population at large, he adds: "Once you understand you're doing it for targeted audience research, the kind of depth you can get through a mobile-designed survey is really powerful." ■

## OUTLOOK

### Shades of Gray

No consensus appears to exist about the future of political polling. Pollsters in the field tend to be less willing to try new approaches than corporations and other entities that rely on surveys.

"Political pollsters are not usually the industry leaders," said Christina Matthews, a Republican pollster in Alexandria, Va.<sup>96</sup>

Some scholars wonder if the rise of "big data," the technological ability to swiftly vacuum numerous details about people's habits, will someday overtake traditional polling. Such data can be gleaned and analyzed faster than through telephone polls, with new features — such as tagging the data with Global Positioning System coordinates — greatly broadening its reach.<sup>97</sup>

"I foresee a world in which we'll blend surveys covering full populations . . . with continuous-time, sensor and other data on subsets of the population," said Georgetown University Provost Robert Groves, a social statistician.<sup>98</sup>

For now, though, many pollsters say telephone polling will remain dominant in the political world. "In the short run, there isn't anything as good as a live call to a cell phone or landline," Democratic pollster Greenberg says. "I don't see that going away."

Terry Casey, a political science professor at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Ind., agrees with Greenberg. "I would be surprised if what we do in terms of polling is radically different in 10 years," Casey says. "More often than not, [pollsters] do get the results right."

*The Times'* Leonhardt said he foresees a greater reliance on text messaging to cell phones. "If text messaging becomes nearly universal and occurs mostly through peoples' mobile phone, surveyors could use random-digit texting as a way to poll people, for instance," he said.<sup>99</sup>

Hankin, the former Obama pollster, says the industry needs to broaden its ability to capture public ideologies. His firm, Lincoln Park Strategies, uses more layers in its questions and sampling than many traditional firms, enabling it to score the electorate into 16 different demographic clusters that can be used to tailor messages to voters.<sup>100</sup>

"There's way too much one-dimensional viewing of how opinion works," he says. "You're either A or B, pro-choice or pro-life. But most people live their lives in shades of gray. What [pollsters] really need to be asking is, 'What's your ideology, and where do you place Obama or Romney on that spectrum?' When you start overlaying these things, really 5 percent of the public are people who would, by definition, be an actual moderate or an actual independent."

*FiveThirtyEight's* Silver, meanwhile, says he hopes his approach of aggregating a wide number of polls — instead of placing too much importance on any single poll — continues to gain currency.

"I hope that — probably not by next election cycle, but by 2024 or 2028 — it's just kind of incorporated

into the DNA of political coverage and encourages people to think more about uncertainty," he said.<sup>101</sup>

Whatever polling changes are proposed, Western New England's Vercellotti predicts that they will provoke intense discussion. "The industry is filled with really smart, determined people — feisty, argumentative people," he says. "What makes it interesting is to see how we all adapt." ■

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**American Association for Public Opinion Research**, 111 Deer Lake Rd., Suite 100, Deerfield, IL 60015; 847-205-2651; [www.aapor.org](http://www.aapor.org). The main association for public opinion and survey-research professionals.

**Annenberg Public Policy Center**, 202 S. 36th St., Philadelphia, PA 19104-3806; 215-898-9400; [www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org). University of Pennsylvania-based group that conducts a wide-ranging national election survey.

**FiveThirtyEight.com**, 147 Columbus Ave., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10023; [www.fivethirtyeight.com](http://www.fivethirtyeight.com). Website founded by statistician Nate Silver that dissects polls and examines political polling.

**Gallup Organization**, 901 F St., N.W., Washington, DC 20004; 202-715-3030; [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com). Major polling organization that focuses heavily on politics.

**Pew Research Center**, 1615 L St., N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036; 202-419-4300; [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org). Nonpartisan "fact tank" providing information on issues, attitudes and trends shaping the United States.

**Princeton Survey Research Associates International**, 600 Alexander Rd., Suite 2-2, Princeton, NJ 08540; 609-924-9204; [www.psrai.com](http://www.psrai.com). Independent company that does polling for a variety of clients, including the news media.

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