

"In a government based on suffrage the question is not whether the opinion of any one person is intelligent, but whether the collective judgment of all the people is intelligent. Democracy doesn't require that every man be a philosopher; it only requires that the sum total of all opinions be sound." —George Gallup, 1943



1824



First Straw Poll The poll showed a lead for Andrew Jackson over John Quincy Adams and two others. Jackson did then win the popular vote but failed to get a majority in the Electoral College. The race was thrown to the House of Representatives, which picked Adams as the next president.



"What I want to get done is exactly what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly."
—Abraham Lincoln, 1861



1936

George Gallup calls election correctly for FDR, using probability theory to generalize from a small sample



1920s-1930s

The Blossoming of Market Research Opinion researchers used sampling, survey techniques, and statistical methods to delve into consumers' minds.



1916-1936

Literary Digest Straw Poll The bigger the sample size, the better? The poll was sent to 10 million people in 1936, and the 2 million who responded indicated that Republican Alf Landon was winning the presidency. But it was a bad sample, drawn from a list of people more likely to be Republican.



2000s

Polling Aggregators Pollster.com and fivethirtyeight.com reduce the margin of error in polls by combining multiple polls and/or running simulations



2010s

Polling Techniques in Flux Cell-phone only households, call screening, low response rates, the rise of Internet polling, robo polling, and online panels are among the new considerations.



2012

Unskewing the Polls Convinced that turnout would not match 2008's, Romney's pollsters assumed that polls showing an Obama lead must be wrong and altered their polls' turnout model. Romney was reportedly "shell shocked" when he lost.



"The private citizen, beset by partisan appeals for the loan of his Public Opinion, will soon see, perhaps, that these appeals are not a compliment to his intelligence, but an imposition on his good nature and an insult to his sense of evidence. —Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 1922