

THE BIG PICTURE: HOW WE KNOW WHAT THE PUBLIC REALLY THINKS

Public opinion polling is hard to get our heads around—how can we know what the public thinks without asking everyone? It seems beyond counterintuitive that we can estimate what an entire nation thinks by asking as few as 1,500 people, and yet, so we can. While polling can feel mysterious, the truth is it is anything but—the science of polling allows us to make very educated estimates of what the public thinks.

The History of Polling



JULY 4, 1776

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands that have connected them with another...a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to the separation.” —Declaration of Independence

1941



National Opinion Research Center

1946



The University of Michigan Survey Research Center

1947



The Roper Center

1947



American Association of Public Opinion Research

1956



Louis Harris and Associates

The American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup)

1936



1948



Dewey Defeats Truman?
Bad polling and an early press time lead to the iconic headline.

1936



FDR First president to use private pollsters for election strategy and public policy

1970s



Move to telephone-based polls

1960s



From Ike to JFK and Beyond
Heavy reliance on in-house polls

2000



Bush vs. Gore Flawed exit polls were used to call Florida for Gore. The call then changed and ultimately left Bush the presumptive winner. The Supreme Court stopped a recount that might have given Florida, and the presidency, to Gore.

“We all do no end of feeling and we mistake it for thinking. And out of it we get an aggregation which we consider a boon. Its name is public opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it is the voice of God.”
—Mark Twain, “Corn-pone Opinions,” 1900