

A GUIDE TO
PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

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By George Gallup

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TO EDWARD G. BENSON

whose ability, objectivity, and pioneering zeal

did so much

to advance public opinion research

throughout the world

PREFACE

TO THE REVISED EDITION

WHEN *A Guide to Public Opinion Polls* was first published in 1944, it was designed to answer, in non-technical language, the questions that people most frequently ask about public opinion polling. The present revised edition contains a number of new questions that have arisen during the last four years in the new and fast-growing science of opinion measurement. All questions from the previous edition that still seem pertinent have been retained, but the answers have in the majority of cases been expanded and fresh illustrations added.

This revised edition includes a full discussion and appraisal of the two major sampling methods now in general use—quota sampling and area sampling. It likewise includes a much-expanded discussion of question-wording techniques and of interviewing methods. The accuracy record of public opinion polls has been brought up to date. A new section on polling in foreign countries has been added.

The author's thanks are due to Dr. Alfred Max, codirector of the French Institute of Public Opinion, who first assembled the questions for the original edition of the guidebook and did much of the early work in preparing that edition. Those who have given valuable help in preparing this revised edition are William A. Lydgate, editor of the American Institute of Public Opinion; William S. Gillam, statistical director of the American Institute; Emery H. Ruby, who is in charge of interviewers, Lawrence E. Benson, the late Edward G. Benson, Lewis Bowen, Lita Scheel, and Kathleen Teggart.

GEORGE GALLUP

Princeton, N.J.
April, 1948

FOREWORD

IT IS hoped that this book will provide readers with a better conception of methods employed in public opinion research and with a better understanding of the value of poll results to democratic governments.

Public opinion polls have been thoroughly tested in times of both peace and war. Virtually every important issue since 1935 which has come before the country has been covered in periodic surveys. The value of polls to democracy is written into the record of this era.

The reliability of methods now employed to gauge public opinion has been demonstrated time and again, not only in the United States but in a dozen different nations. Polls have met successfully the test which any scientific method must meet. They have proved equally reliable when applied in completely different circumstances and by different organizations.

Students of government have noted many contributions to our democratic process made by polls. Many of these will be discussed at length in the pages which follow. Suffice it here to review the ten which seem most important:

1. Public opinion polls have provided political leaders with a more accurate gauge of public opinion than they had prior to 1935.

No responsible person in the field of public opinion research would assert that polling methods are perfect. On the other hand, no one who has studied all the methods of gauging public opinion would maintain that other methods are superior to polling methods. Certainly the indices which were relied upon most in the past—letters, newspaper editorials, self-appointed experts, and the like—have been found to be highly inaccurate as guides to public opinion.

2. Public opinions polls have speeded up the processes of de-

mocracy by providing not only accurate, but swift, reports of public opinion.

Modern poll procedures make it possible to conduct a nationwide referendum or plebiscite in a matter of hours, and to report results that would differ by only a few percentage points from the results which would be obtained if the entire voting population of a nation went to the polls. In fact in many situations—particularly those in which a substantial portion of the population fails to take the trouble to vote—the poll results might be even more accurate as a measure of public sentiment than the official returns.

3. Public opinion polls have shown that the common people do make good decisions.

The arguments which have continued from the early days of the country regarding the political wisdom of the common people can now be settled on the basis of a mountain of factual data. The views of the people have been recorded on hundreds of issues and enough time has elapsed to judge the soundness of majority opinion on scores of these problems.

The people have displayed such good sense, and have made such a good record, that the faith of many persons in the basic premises of democracy has been rekindled. There is little disposition today to refer to the people in slighting terms, as was the case after the first World War, when it was common to think of the people as comprising a “boobocracy.”

4. Public opinion polls have helped to focus attention on major issues of the day.

They have provided what Walter Lippmann, in his book *Public Opinion*, asserted was greatly needed by this democracy—a machinery for scoring. By injecting the element of controversy, by showing the division of opinion, in fact by helping to simplify major issues by expressing them in language understandable to the great mass of people, polls have helped to increase public interest in many national issues.

5. Public opinion polls have uncovered many "areas of ignorance."

In performing this service they have brought out certain fundamental weaknesses of our educational system and have pointed to the shortcomings of the whole process of keeping the public well-informed on vital issues of the day.

6. Public opinion polls have helped administrators of government departments make wiser decisions.

The problem of dealing intelligently with the public is one that confronts not only the heads of many government departments, but state and local officials everywhere. Government is learning what business learned years ago—that any program designed to influence the public must be based upon accurate knowledge of public attitudes. Millions of dollars can be wasted by following wrong hunches about the public's information and thinking on important policies.

7. Public opinion polls have made it more difficult for political bosses to pick presidential candidates "in smoke-filled rooms."

The "open" primary was originally intended to give voters a chance to help guide the parties in choosing presidential nominees and candidates for other political office. It was designed to strip political machines of their power to select candidates without respect to the wishes of the people.

Polls can perform this service which the open primary was intended to provide. They can report the popularity of various candidates with the voters. And in doing so they can make it that much more difficult for professional politicians to hand-pick candidates.

8. Public opinion polls have shown that the people are not motivated, in their voting, solely by the factor of self-interest, as many politicians have presumed.

Time after time, poll results reveal the fairness of the people in spreading the tax load to all segments of the population, their resentment at "log rolling" methods, and their concern about the

national good, as contrasted with the selfish interests of their own community or state. Too often, officeholders assume that the only road to popularity and to re-election is to grab as much political booty as possible for their own electorate—a fact disproved by poll results.

9. Public opinion polls constitute almost the only present check on the growing power of pressure groups.

Many students of government have been concerned with the great influence exerted upon legislation by lobbyists for the various pressure groups in the country. By exploding the claims of these lobbyists to represent the “unanimous” or “overwhelming” sentiment of the pressure group which employs them, public opinion polls have revealed their real status.

Poll results show that pressure-group spokesmen often represent only a minority of those within their own groups, and prove baseless their threats of political reprisal if legislators do not bow to their wishes.

10. Public opinion polls help define the “mandate” of the people in national elections.

Inevitably many wrong conclusions are drawn from the attempt to read the will of the people on national issues, by examining election returns on individuals. Some of the greatest mistakes of the last thirty years have come about by trying to decide what the public really thought on issues, when it cast its vote for candidates.

Not until elections are changed to permit the public to vote on all the issues which come up in a campaign will it be possible to draw accurate conclusions about the opinion of the majority on specific problems. Meanwhile public opinion polls can perform this service. At the same time that the views of voters are obtained on candidates, the views of these same voters can be recorded on issues. In this way, election results can be interpreted much more accurately than in the past.

Since this book has been designed as a guide to polls, and not

as a textbook, no attempt has been made to cover fully every phase of the problems of public opinion research. An effort has been made, however, to answer all the questions most frequently asked of polling organizations. Questions asked by teachers, journalists, party leaders, officeholders, and students of public opinion are stated, either in their original form, or as they are usually worded by those who seek information about polling practices.

Because there is overlapping in the questions, there is of necessity repetition in the answers.

Many persons have contributed to the development of this new field of research, and credit for present achievements must, therefore, be shared by many.

Hadley Cantril, director of the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton University, has conducted many valuable experimental studies on problems relating to the measurement of public opinion. His book, *Gauging Public Opinion*, should serve to guide researchers in this field for years to come.

Elmo Roper, director of the *Fortune* magazine polls, has pioneered the use of attitude scales in public opinion surveys. The accuracy of his forecasts in presidential elections has done much to establish the reliability of sampling procedures.

Dr. Rensis Likert, director of the University of Michigan survey division, has, more than anyone else, directed attention to the usefulness of intensive interviewing techniques and to the value of "open" questions in revealing public attitudes on issues of the day.

Through his advocacy of "panels," Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld has been instrumental in showing the value of this method in studying changes in public opinion. By reinterviewing the same persons periodically, Dr. Lazarsfeld has demonstrated how this procedure can shed light on the factors which cause people to change their views.

In his book, *Straw Votes*, Dr. Claude Robinson was one of the first to bring to public attention the problems, and possible solutions, involved in election forecasting. In dealing with public opinion problems of business and industry, he has helped to prove the usefulness to the business world of public opinion techniques.

Although the subject of political geography has been somewhat neglected in the United States, Louis Bean of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Harold F. Gosnell of the University of Chicago, and Stuart Rice of the Central Statistical Board in Washington have done much to remedy this deficiency. Dr. Bean, particularly, has devoted much time in recent years to the study of political trends by regions and to the relationship of voting trends to economic factors. His book, *Voting Behavior*, is a useful handbook for those interested in political trends as revealed by election results. Rice and Gosnell were among the first to see the possibilities of quantitative methods in the field of political and public opinion research.

Perhaps no one has given more thought to the present-day relationship of polls to democratic governments than Dr. Saul Forbes Rae of the Department of External Affairs of the Dominion of Canada. In *The Pulse of Democracy*, the philosophy of government by majority opinion, and the role of public opinion polls in defining this majority, are described at length.

Many others have contributed to the techniques and to the growing acceptance of this new field. Among these are Dr. Henry Link, of the Psychological Corporation; Archibald Crossley, of Crossley, Inc.; the late Harry Field, Director of the National Opinion Research Center, and Clyde W. Hart, its present director. Professor Theodore Brown of Harvard and Professor Samuel S. Wilks of Princeton have given great help to those engaged in public opinion fact-finding by their studies on the statistical problems involved in sampling.

Special credit should go to the men and women who have de-

veloped local and state polls of public opinion: Henry J. Kroeger and Norman C. Meier of the Iowa Poll; Ralph O. Nafziger of the Minnesota Poll and his former associate, Lloyd E. Borg; Kenneth Fink of the New Jersey State Poll; Paul Trescott and Alfred Westhoff of the *Philadelphia Bulletin* Poll; Joe Belden and Alex Louis of the Texas Poll; Mervin D. Field of the California Poll; Robert Ahern of the Massachusetts Poll; and Jane A. Shepherd, formerly of the *Washington Post* Poll.

In the field of interpretation of public opinion poll findings, T. A. Bailey of Stanford University deserves special commendation as one of the very first historians to use opinion poll reports in the writing of history. His skillful and intelligent use of poll material in *A Diplomatic History of the American People* and in *The Man in the Street* should be of interest to public opinion experts everywhere.

In countries outside the United States, the work of public opinion measurement has made great strides. Only a few of the men responsible for this development can be mentioned in the space of this Foreword: Roy Morgan of the Australian Public Opinion Polls, Henry Durant of the British Institute of Public Opinion, Wilfrid Sanders of the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, Ditlev Reventlow of the Dansk Gallup Institut (Denmark), Alfred Max and Jean Stoetzel of the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (France), Artturi Raula of Suomen Gallup O/Y (Finland), Jan Stapel and W. J. de Jonge of the Nederlandsch Instituut voor de Publieke Opinie (Holland), P. Luzzatto-Fegiz of DOXA (Italy), Bjorn Balstad of the Norsk Gallup Institutt (Norway), Sven O. Blomquist of the Svenska Gallup Institutet (Sweden), Auricelio Penteado of the Instituto Brasileiro de Opiniao Publica é Estatistica (Brazil), and H. Wahl Asmussen, coordinator of the Scandinavian Institutes. The above organizations are affiliated in the International Association of Public Opinion (Gallup) Institutes with the American Institute of Public Opinion.

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