

Letter to the Editor

Letters to the Editor will be confined to discussion of papers which have appeared in the Journal of Official Statistics and of important issues facing the statistical community.

Joseph Belden is the recipient of the 1991 American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Award for lifetime contributions to public opinion research. At our request, Mr. Belden was kind enough to recount some of his memories of opinion polling. Mr. Belden devoted his entire career to market and opinion research, starting in the 1930s as polling was emerging as a profession and an academic discipline. One of Mr. Belden's areas of expertise is Spanish-language market research and research for newspapers.

Mr. Belden is a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research and has served on the boards of the American Marketing Association, the Roper Public Opinion Research Center, the School of Communication of the University of Texas at Austin, and the Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio.

Memoir of Polling in America

Dear Editor:

Having witnessed the incunabula of modern opinion polling, and having been a participant as a pollster during its first half century (late 1930s through late 1980s), perhaps I can reminisce a bit, at least on the North American experience. How much simpler those early days were before we had heard of probability sampling, completion rates, and printouts, when George Gallup could

demand that for each survey his executives get out of the office and do some interviews themselves to stay in touch with the field. He included himself in this practice, and he relished telling about the respondent he approached with the usual "I'm doing the Gallup Poll and I would like to ask you a few questions," adding, "My name is Gallup." Whereupon the respondent asked, "Are you a relative?"

Among early, and continuing, challenges to polling (including market research), are five I would single out as most significant. First came the problem of acceptance of polls as more than journalistic stunts. Skepticism ranged widely, from disbelief in the reliability of small samples to the notion that the public would not cooperate. Despite the high performance of the early polls, including the brilliant prediction of the winner in the U.S. presidential election of 1936, the policy of a major wire service excluded all poll results from its news stories.

Newspaper editors were particularly hard to sell on the value of systematic surveys – I always felt they resented the pollsters' usurping an editorial prerogative, that is, the ascertaining of public opinion. But those days are over; reference to polls in the news media is now ubiquitous, itself creating problems I will discuss below.

The second big early challenge was the shift from quota to probability sampling. This and other technical improvements

made it much more demanding to be a good pollster. Despite early resistance, probability principles soon took over as the hallmark of good survey research. Yet in many places the old quota selection sample persists to this day, perhaps with good reason, as more rigorous methods become increasingly difficult to carry out, particularly in underdeveloped countries.

Thirdly, there was an era of increased attention to the wording and handling of questions, areas many researchers believe need even more attention today. Fourth, a major development has been computerization, giving polling speed and analysis capabilities unimaginable before. And the fifth "megatrend" in the first half century of modern polling has been the overwhelming shift to the telephone, both to sample and interview – for good or for evil.

What are today's main problems for the polls? First I would list their very proliferation. Some critics think we have passed the saturation point, particularly that the public's willingness to cooperate is already overtaxed. Everyone in the business knows that the percentage of respondents refusing to be interviewed has steadily increased. Unfortunately, some of this erosion is due to non-polling activities of telemarketers and fund raisers, who have discovered that camouflaging their appeals as pseudo-polls enhances their effectiveness.

Legitimate pollsters themselves often contribute to the refusal rate by designing overly burdensome instruments. There are surveys underway that require a single respondent to (1) answer an hour-long personally-administered questionnaire, (2) keep a diary for a week, and (3) cooperate in a mop-up telephone interview. The amount of data produced is enormous – and so may be the damage.

Telephone data gathering and the computer have speeded up polling marvelously, but does

the competitive pressure to publish lower quality? For example, do the interview completion rates and thus the representativeness of the sample suffer when the field work must meet a news deadline of just a few hours?

Despite great strides in political polling, the ability to forecast elections is precarious. Some pre-election polls turn out uncannily accurate. And then along comes the Nicaraguan debacle of 1990, in which half of the 29 polls on the Chamorro-Ortega presidential election were wrong – for not fully-understood reasons. Perhaps we are just learning that cultural and political differences between pollster and electors can have more effect than we have thought. How little progress we seem to have made in this particular area since the U.S.'s own polling disaster of 1948.

Among major benefits induced by polling development surely has been its contribution to the spread of democracy worldwide in recent years. Thanks to survey research, today's analysis of public opinion by governments and information media is vastly superior. Among the most notable improvements have been the exit poll and the new speed with which even an international measurement can be made.

From my personal experience, a major contribution of survey techniques has been literally the discovery of the reader by the newspaper industry. Until rather recently, the standard measure of "size" or "impact" of a newspaper was its circulation (copies distributed, whether read or not). Survey techniques suddenly made it possible to measure audience, or the number of persons actually reading an issue. Broadcast media and magazines long ago adopted the concept. But during the last two or three decades newspapers have also used research to establish and define their total reach, regardless of their circulation. *USA Today* does not boast of *copies* sold, but of its more

than six million daily *readers*. This has been a major shift in thinking among many newspaper executives and editors – thanks to survey research.

If I had to single out the most challenging problems facing polling today I would name the mounting respondent refusal rate and the indiscriminate proliferation of poll results. While I celebrate the great develop-

ment of polling, I wonder whether the profession, individually and collectively, is doing enough to manage these tendencies.

Joseph Belden
5001 Wyandot Court
Bethesda, MD 20816
U.S.A.