

The Evolution of Presidential Polling

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Seeking Autonomy

The Origins and Growth of Presidential Polling

We have practically no systematic information about what goes on in the minds of public men as they ruminate about the weight to be given to public opinion in governmental decision.¹

Since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, all presidents with the exception of Harry Truman have privately polled citizens. Yet presidential polling remains a puzzle. How have presidents used polls? What are the implications of presidential polling? How have polls become the predominant means by which presidents gauge public opinion? This book attempts to answer these questions by conducting a comprehensive study of presidential polling from the Hoover years to the present. I argue that the emergence and proliferation of presidential polling stem from the tenuous relationships between the presidency and other institutions – specifically Congress, political parties, and the media – that formally served as conduits of public opinion. Simply put, presidents do not trust these institutions, and opt to poll privately rather than rely on them as links to the American people.

President Nixon best exemplifies a president who distrusted these institutions and used polls to gain autonomy and power. According to one of Nixon's advisers, President Nixon believed that "in order to reduce *federal* power, it was first necessary to increase *presidential* power."² Nixon admits that he was determined to "knock heads together in order to get things

¹ V.O. Key, Jr., "Public Opinion and the Decay of Democracy," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 37 (Autumn 1961): 490.

² Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered*. New York: Basic Books, 1994, p. 67. Italics in original. Nixon continued this line of thought, saying that "Bringing power to the White House [was necessary] in order to dish it out." Ibid. For more on President Nixon's attempts to reorganize the executive branch, see Richard P. Nathan, *The Plot that Failed: Nixon and the Administrative Presidency*. New York: Wiley, 1975.

done” in Congress. He recognized early in his presidency that resistance from Congress would be the norm rather than the exception.³

How did Nixon generate presidential power? In part, by using polls. He appointed his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, to “get in touch” with the average American.⁴ Haldeman shared Nixon’s view that the Democrat-controlled Congress was “an awkward and obnoxious obstacle, a hostile foreign power.”⁵ And so Haldeman read polls – voraciously – and denied others access to the poll data he was perusing. When Nixon aide Charles Colson asked to see an April 1971 poll about veterans, Haldeman denied the request, stating that “the President has ordered that no one is to see it.”⁶ Events inevitably shaped opinions about the president. Public opinion helped determine which events to highlight or downplay in the media and therefore public opinion had to be monitored.

Haldeman believed that poll data could be used as a means to advance the administration’s legislative agenda. “The President was concerned as a result of the meeting with the Senators yesterday afternoon that we hadn’t gotten the favorable poll data to them,” Haldeman wrote.⁷ Local polls showing support for President Nixon’s policies were to be disseminated to enhance the president’s popularity in order to ward off presidential challengers. Why? Because Haldeman and Nixon understood that poll data affected legislators’ decisions.

Nixon’s advisers did not want Congress to question how they were paying for polls and feared receiving negative attention if Congress learned about the president’s extensive polling operation. The polls were his; they were none of Congress’ business. Moreover, the polls had political overtones, and as a result, could not be paid for with governmental funds. So the White House resorted to outside funding, namely, the Republican National Committee (RNC) and private (sometimes secret) persons. When asked at one point if he could raise money to pay for some polls, Colson responded, “I would rather not because it is a drain from a more important use later and is a little bit dangerous.”⁸ In another instance, Haldeman informed Colson that he could not see a poll, adding that the paying for polls was aided by a secret

³ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, Vol. I*. New York: Warner Books, 1979, p. 414.

⁴ H.R. Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*. CD-ROM (New York: Sony, 1994, January 29, 1969). Also see Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, “The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59 (1995): 165.

⁵ Rowland Evans, Jr., and Robert D. Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power*. New York: Random House, 1971, p. 109.

⁶ Richard Milhous Nixon Project at the National Archives [RMNP@NA], “ORC 4-28-30/71 Veterans Survey,” Memorandum from Larry Higby to H.R. Haldeman (about Colson’s request), May 4, 1971, Haldeman Files, Box 349.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Memorandum from Larry Higby to H.R. Haldeman, April 23, 1971, Box 334.

⁸ Charles Colson, in Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, “The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59

source. “And we can pay for it,” reads a handwritten note by Haldeman, “the front man was in case we released it.”⁹

Nixon’s polls asked about a wide range of topics – the Vietnam War, whether J. Edgar Hoover should retire, and even if Nixon were responsible for the Watergate break-in. President Nixon read some of these polls and their accompanying analyses. In one memorandum, Nixon even criticized the question wording, claiming that alternative response options were more valuable. Haldeman’s tight reins over access to poll data, and the secrecy, breadth, and depth of these polls all indicate how Nixon’s polling operation was a critical part of his strategy to deal with Congress, the media, and both the Republican and Democratic parties.

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL POLLING

Private presidential polling began during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) administration, when Hadley Cantril, a Princeton University psychology professor and colleague of one of the founders of polling, secretly worked as an unpaid, unofficial public opinion advisor for the FDR White House. The polls that FDR received differ from the private polls of modern presidents in that FDR never hired Cantril or another public opinion expert as a private White House pollster. FDR welcomed the public opinion information offered by Cantril and expressed interest in receiving more. By utilizing private poll data, FDR did not abandon other forms of gauging public opinion, such as tabulating incoming White House mail, but Cantril’s surveys for and advice to the FDR administration legitimized polls as viable political instruments for presidents to gauge public opinion.¹⁰

While President Truman did not employ polls, the Eisenhower administration did, albeit sparingly. Some of these polls, however, exacerbated tensions between the executive and legislative branches when Congress learned that the Eisenhower administration’s State Department had secretly commissioned polls. A House Administration Committee investigation ensued, and hearings revealed that the two branches distrusted each other’s interpretations of public opinion. One State Department official testified that opinions assessed by members of Congress did not comprise public opinion, but rather constituted “congressional opinion.”¹¹ The House committee report

(1995): 171–172, citing RMNP@NA, Memorandum from Colson to Jack Gleason, April 18, 1970, Charles Colson Files, Box 100.

⁹ RMNP@NA, “ORC 4-28-30/71 Veterans Survey,” Memorandum from Larry Higby to H.R. Haldeman (about Colson’s request), May 4, 1971, Haldeman Files, Box 349.

¹⁰ Hadley Cantril, *The Human Dimension: Experiences in Policy Research*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967, p. 40; Gerard Lambert, *All Out of Step*. New York: Doubleday, 1956, pp. 266–279; Leila A. Sussman, “FDR and the White House Mail,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20 (1956): 5–15.

¹¹ State Department Hearings, 85th Congress, H1612-1, June 21–July 11, 1957, 206–208.

concluded that the State Department's polling was illegal, and it served as a warning to the executive branch that Congress considered itself, not the executive branch, to be the official stethoscope of the nation's opinions. Additionally, the House report sent the executive branch a stern message about financing polls – do not use public monies for polling. The executive branch listened to Congress' covetous warning not to usurp its role as an interpreter of public opinion, but it did not quell presidents' yen for polling. What emerged was a process in which political parties, not the executive branch, paid for the president's private polls.

John F. Kennedy's use of polls began in late 1958, when Senator Kennedy was contemplating running for president. New Haven, Connecticut Mayor Dick Lee introduced Kennedy confidant Ted Sorensen to the pollster Lou Harris and Harris soon was hired as the senator's campaign pollster. Candidate and President Kennedy employed polls as a means to assess citizens' attitudes about character, personality, religion, and image. Kennedy's secretly funded polls served as indispensable tools to learn about what would sway the electorate, especially when other candidates did not have the financial resources to conduct polls.

With funding from the Democratic Party, President Johnson employed the polls of Oliver Quayle, a former assistant of Lou Harris. Like Harris' polls for JFK, President Johnson's polls were frequently comprised of local samples (that is, residents of a particular state, county, or congressional district, as compared to a national sample). In keeping with his predecessors Cantril and Harris, Quayle secretly sent his poll reports to senior White House officials, who attentively interpreted public opinion, both about the president's popularity and about particular policies. Johnson was an avid pollreader; when public opinion was measured, Johnson eagerly awaited poll analyses.

President Richard Nixon's polling operation was far more organized and comprehensive than his predecessors'. So concerned was Nixon that others not obtain some public opinion poll data, that he sanitized certain poll reports so the chairman of the Republican National Committee could not see certain poll questions and answers. Poll questions were also asked about the media and Vice President Spiro Agnew, without their knowledge. By this time, presidential polls had developed into an integral and independent function of the executive. Chief White House advisers believed that advancing the president's agenda required knowing the speed and direction of public opinion, without the assistance of one's party, Congress, or the media.

Foster Chanock, the assistant to President Ford's chief of staff, Richard Cheney, served as the official poll collector and interpreter for the Ford White House. Ford's poll data, like Nixon's, covered an array of policy and political arenas, and although Ford's term in office was brief, his use of polls was both extensive and well organized. President Carter's defeat of Gerald Ford catapulted Patrick Caddell to guru status as a surveyor of the public's

mood, as Caddell became both a pollster and a de facto policy adviser. Caddell's successor, Richard Wirthlin, served as a key adviser and confidante to President Reagan. The business of presidential polling had become an accepted and legitimate institution in American politics. Presidents Bush and Clinton learned a lesson from the Reagan White House, and according to scholars, journalists, and former White House employees, private polls were also an integral part of their White House *modus operandi*.

This cursory synopsis underscores the extensive but understudied history of presidential polling. Although presidents' interest in public opinion is commonly perceived to stem from their wanting to know how popular they are, archival data show that presidential polling has often included a variety of questions about public attitudes, preferences, personalities, priorities, and policies, both foreign and domestic. This book explains how presidential polling evolved from a small and secretive enterprise to a large and secretive institution.

Presidential polls fulfill the desire by presidents to gauge public opinion autonomously and scientifically. Private polling begins with the premise that White House advisers value accurate, public opinion-related information. These advisers recognize that various political actors will disseminate public opinion information that does not necessarily advance presidents' electoral or legislative agendas. Members of Congress, interest groups, and media elites all have views that sometimes conflict with the presidents' agendas. As such, White House advisers do not trust these actors to provide them with public opinion data. Independent assessments of public opinion provide: 1) autonomy from various political institutions such as Congress, political parties, and the media; 2) a means to ensure that one's own gauges of public opinion are accurate; 3) a vehicle to execute electoral and legislative strategies; and 4) power that is derived from implementing these strategies. Presidents do not ask if polls reflect public opinion, or if polls positively affect their reelection campaigns or their passing of legislation. They believe that the answer is yes to both questions. Rather, given their belief that scientifically derived poll data are invaluable resources in these efforts, they ask, what poll data should they obtain?

CONGRESSIONAL INDIFFERENCE TOWARD POLLS AND THE GROWTH OF THE PRESIDENCY

In *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, David Mayhew described congressional behavior to be largely oriented toward gaining reelection.¹² While presidents are constitutionally constrained by the 22nd Amendment to serve only two terms, Mayhew's logic also applies to presidents. Presidents' private

¹² David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974.

polls are employed to advance the president's election strategies, despite federal laws prohibiting presidents from using White House resources for official campaign purposes. Today, the president receives valuable poll data that are paid for by his party; occasionally, he shares some of his data with party and congressional leaders.

Why don't presidents share all of their data and why don't members of Congress complain that the executive branch is exploiting them by using valuable party resources for secret polls? The answer may be found by recognizing how the rise of presidential polling is but one facet of the growth and power of presidential politics.¹³ For example, presidents largely control who will become the chair of their party. John F. Kennedy, for example, chose his senate colleague Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA) to be the Democratic National Committee (DNC) chair. Today, despite the recommendations by party leaders, the party chair remains by-and-large handpicked by the president, not congressional leaders.

The growth of the executive branch has also manifested itself in sheer numbers. The burgeoning presidency has made it difficult for members of Congress, regardless of party, to complain about the rise of the executive branch, in part because the legislative branch largely has condoned and sometimes even voted for it. With regard to polling, members of Congress now poll their constituents. Through their party caucuses, polling has burgeoned on the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, as members of Congress receive poll-related information, some of which is similar to, albeit not identical to, the data that the president receives. If it is okay for us (members of Congress), then it must be okay for White House advisers. Congressional leaders recognize some degree of tension between the executive and legislative branches to be inevitable and, therefore, expect their president to hoard sensitive, poll-related information, some of which may concern wooing or placating members of Congress. Today, perhaps more than ever, members of Congress think of these inherent tensions as normal, and therefore do not expect the White House advisers to share information obtained from presidential polls. By polling like presidents do, Congress has tacitly approved of presidential polling as a viable and necessary function of the executive branch.

It is worth noting that members of Congress were initially reluctant to use polls, and that their reluctance fortified the executive branch's view that Congress did not want or need to see private polls. Both Susan Herbst and Carl Hawver have confirmed the dearth of congressional polling in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.¹⁴ Interviews with U.S. senators and their chiefs of staff indicate

¹³ See, for example, Arthur Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989; and Stephen J. Wayne, *The Legislative Presidency*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

¹⁴ Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; Carl Hawver, "The Congressman and His Public Opinion Poll," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 18 (1954): 123-129.

that tabulations of incoming phone calls, unsolicited mail, and conversations at town meetings continue to serve as an important means by which members of Congress evaluate and interpret constituents' opinions.¹⁵ Herbst suggests that congressional reluctance toward using polls partly stems from the then popular belief, fostered by Walter Lippmann, that citizens' opinions were fickle, untrustworthy, and therefore not to be taken into account when making policy decisions. This view, combined with the fear that polls created a bandwagon effect, helps explain Congress' initial aversion to polls.¹⁶

While Congress dismissed polls as illegitimate and unnecessary, presidents gained access to poll-related resources and technology and made private polling part of their job. Financial and personnel resources helped presidents pay for and interpret polls. Money was frequently (and sometimes secretly) raised by presidents exclusively for private polling purposes and White House staffers were soon interpreting private surveys. Congress began to recognize that its function as the voice of the people was being replaced by opinion polling in 1957, when a House investigation about the financing of executive branch polling revealed that the executive branch attempted to pay for polls without congressional consent. This discovery of secret State Department polls reveals how the executive branch sought to measure public opinion independently of Congress, and it also signifies the degree to which the executive branch had been willing to use finances that were not originally intended for polling.

Now, members of Congress have armed themselves with their own polling apparatuses, and grievances about private presidential polling have been virtually eliminated. So long as presidents are not using congressionally appropriated monies to measure public opinion, and so long as the media, Congress, and political parties can also poll, objections to presidential private polling have disappeared. This cessation of complaining demonstrates that the issue at hand is not about which institution is the intended conduit for public opinion, but rather about power and autonomy. Presidents seek power and autonomy and use polls to acquire them.

Congress has condoned presidential polling, to an extent. Congress does not pay for White House polls and never has. Presidents such as Roosevelt benefited from polling information that was brought to their attention and financed by private funds. The public opinion research that Hadley Cantril

¹⁵ Interview with Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA), August 2, 1994. Interview with Robert McDonald, Administrative Assistant to Senator John Danforth (R-MO), August 2, 1994. Conversation with Steven Solarz, former member of Congress (D-NY), November 15, 1994. Conversations with Jim Gimpel, former aide to Senator Dan Coats (R-IN), 1994–1998.

¹⁶ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, pp. 92–93. Also see Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press, 1965. See, for example, William Pierce, *Congressional Record*, 77th Congress, 1st session, 1941, Vol. 87; *The New York Times*, September 5, 1936, 14; *The New York Times*, November 6, 1936, 24, and November 11, 1936, IV, 8; and Herbst, *ibid.*

offered for FDR's perusal was conducted at Princeton University through the Office of Public Opinion Research (OPOR). OPOR had been funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to develop and refine the burgeoning field of survey research methods. Subsequently, much of Cantril's work was financed by retired businessman Gerard Lambert, including that which interested FDR. In 1957, an investigation of secret State Department polls initiated congressional concern about who paid for presidential polls, but after the investigation, many presidential polls were still paid for without full disclosure of their source. To this day, there are no memoranda detailing how President Kennedy's polls were financed; one memorandum from the Nixon Archives speaks of a "front man" to pay for polls. Secret funds from private individuals and political party resources available to the executive branch have enabled presidents to poll privately and in abundance. Despite laws prohibiting White House money from being spent on presidential polls, private polling continues to rise and party resources for presidential polling remain bountiful. While taxpayers do not pay for the polls, they do subsidize the salaries of the presidential advisers who interpret private poll data. This news is troubling to those who disdain polls. To historians and political scientists, however, such facts are puzzling, not because of any possible legal loopholes, but because the evolution of presidential polling has gone largely unexplained.

THE DECLINE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

According to James Caesar, the declining importance of political parties and the corresponding rise of presidential primaries have made presidential candidates' telegenic and communication skills essential components of the modern presidency.¹⁷ Candidates without party leadership endorsements can become independent entrepreneurs who marshal interest groups to organize volunteers and raise money. "In the past," Thomas Patterson wrote in his book *Out of Order*, "the parties buffered the relationship between candidates and groups. Today, it is very difficult for candidates to ignore the demands of interest groups or to confine them to their proper place."¹⁸ In his book, *The Party's Over*, David Broder shares this sentiment, arguing that the decline of parties as organizing devices for people and politics helps explain

¹⁷ James Caesar, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 310. Examples of works that discuss the decline in political parties include James I. Lingle, *Representation and Presidential Primaries: The Democratic Party in the Post-Reform Era*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981; Nelson W. Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983; Byron E. Shafer, *Bifurcated Politics: Evolution and Reform in the National Party Convention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988; and Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of Political Parties 1952-1992*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

¹⁸ Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage, 1994, p. 47.

a “systemic fragmentation” of American politics.¹⁹ Marvin Kalb concurs by arguing that as parties no longer serve to distance presidential candidates from interest groups, the press has assumed the parties’ former role as an “arbiter of American presidential politics – a position for which it is not prepared, emotionally, professionally, or constitutionally.”²⁰

Although much of the prevailing party decline literature alleges that changes in the presidential selection process in the late 1960s and early 1970s have affected the burgeoning of candidate entrepreneurship, the groundwork for presidential polling precedes the presidential selection and campaign finance reforms of this era. The presidential primary system enervated the role of political parties as the vehicles for political advertising, fund raising, and campaign strategizing. Presidential primaries and changes in campaign finance laws have diminished the influence of party bosses in choosing candidates and have encouraged presidential candidates and their campaigns to measure public opinion independently via private polls. The hiring of presidential pollsters, however, occurred before the McGovern-Fraser Commission ever met to discuss reforming the presidential selection process. Pollster Lou Harris, for example, played a prominent role in the 1960 presidential campaign of John Kennedy. A memorandum from the Kennedy archives reveals how the DNC asked to see Lou Harris’ extensive polling for Senator (and presidential candidate) John F. Kennedy, suggesting that Harris’ polls were commissioned without the Democratic Party’s assistance. According to Larry Sabato, whereas party leaders once informed presidential candidates about voters’ opinions and attitudes, pollsters now dispense the same information with a scientific legitimacy that party leaders never had.²¹

Here, another puzzle emerges. The McGovern-Fraser reforms exacerbated political polling by creating primaries that forced candidates to market themselves using various media, and to determine voter preferences quickly and accurately. However, the evolution of presidential polls precedes these reforms, suggesting once again that presidents’ desire to seek autonomy from the media and political parties helps explain how pollsters have become key political advisers.

As presidential candidates use private polling as the primary source for measuring public opinion during their campaigns, they also adopt similar methods and organizations to interpret White House polls once they are elected. For example, after serving as the pollster for the Kennedy campaign, Lou Harris continued to poll for President Kennedy in a similar manner

¹⁹ David S. Broder, *The Party’s Over: The Failure of Politics in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

²⁰ Marvin Kalb, “Too Much Talk and Not Enough Action,” *Washington Journalism Review* 14 (September 1992): 33.

²¹ Larry J. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

(that is, with minimal interference from JFK's advisers). A campaign strategist, Pat Caddell, becomes a key presidential adviser and pollster once Carter is elected. Party reforms, then, institutionalize the role of the presidential campaign pollster, as the pollster for the winning presidential candidate assumes the role as the chief interpreter of public opinion data in the White House. Presidents' pollsters have a great deal of autonomy; they largely determine what to ask, to whom, and how. By concentrating the flow of public opinion-related information in the hands of one person, alternative sources of public opinion information are discounted.

INTEREST GROUP PROPAGANDA IS NOT PUBLIC OPINION

Why don't presidents rely on interest groups to assess public opinion? While it is advantageous for interest groups to boast that the views they espouse are popular with a large public, no one believes that the tobacco lobby, for example, speaks for all citizens, smokers, and nonsmokers alike. Politicians know that interest groups advertise their views to be popular, because to do otherwise would be politically foolish. As a result, today's presidents know better than to rely on interest groups' assessments of public opinion as accurate and reliable. Rather, they realize that these appraisals are disseminated only if they benefit the interest group that provided the information.

In his seminal work on interest groups entitled *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, David Truman argued that interest groups seek to ascertain what public opinion is in order to control it:

Being almost inevitably minorities in the total population, organized interest groups must find some means of allying themselves with other groups and of mobilizing their 'fellow-travelers' if they hope to compete successfully for the attention and indulgence of other groups and of government institutions. The state of public opinion affects the limits to which such alliances can extend, and propaganda is a major means of mobilizing support and securing allies.²²

To Truman, pressure groups gauge public opinion in order to build coalitions for gaining access to government officials. They seek to guide and control public opinion not by falsely claiming that they speak on behalf of all of the mass public, but rather by using propagandistic techniques to suggest that they speak on behalf of an influential group.²³

²² David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*. New York: Knopf, pp. 213–214.

²³ Additional readings about the functions of interest groups include V.O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups, Fourth Edition*. New York: Crowell, 1958; Harmon Zeigler, *Interest Groups in American Society*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964; and James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Many politicians envision interest groups as Truman did – as vehicles for promulgating propaganda. New York State former Governor Herbert Lehman expressed the idea that interest groups inaccurately measured public opinion in a 1938 issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, then a new journal devoted to the study of public opinion research. To Governor Lehman, the power of pressure groups had to be fought vigilantly by informed citizens:

We must be vigilant lest we accept as public opinion that which is only propaganda of well-organized pressure groups. The power of pressure groups is very great. They are frequently actuated by selfish interests. Their power can be curbed only through the force of the informed opinion of the public. Failure of public opinion to assert itself against pressure groups is due largely to public indifference, to the partisan attitude of political parties, and to the apparent unwillingness or inability of our agencies of news-dissemination to place before the public as a whole the information on which sound judgments can be reached. These agencies frequently are unwilling to accept the unpopularity that comes through opposition to pressure groups.²⁴

For Lehman, it is the duty of an informed public to fight the insidious partisan forces of interest groups. The demands of pressure groups on legislators are so intense that when citizens fail to counter pressure groups' propaganda, "bad government and legislation" ensues that is "in no way representative of the wishes of the people as a whole."²⁵

Not surprisingly, political pollsters have served as articulate spokespeople for their profession, claiming that their surveys have been an antidote against pressure group propaganda. In one of the first issues of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Archibald Crossley defended political polls as the only vehicle that could battle the pressure groups' campaign to shape and define public opinion:

If the polls are legislated out of existence, it will be chiefly because an open revelation of public opinion is not desired. *The New York Times* fears that legislators will be swayed by polls because they desire to be reelected. 'The American form of Government is not really built to function successfully on this pattern. It is properly assumed that our representative will think for themselves.' In other words, it might be dangerous if our lawmakers know the desires of their constituents . . . The desire for reelection being what it is, the argument may have some weight. But the choice is not between *vox populi* and silence. The real choice is between reliable information and unreliable information supplied by pressure groups.²⁶

If legislators do not use polls, they will continue to measure public opinion inaccurately by relying on pressure groups' distorted assessments of

²⁴ Herbert H. Lehman, "A Public Opinion Sustaining Democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Special Supplement, Public Opinion in a Democracy (January 1938): 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ Archibald Crossley, "Straw Polls in 1936," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1 (1937): 34.

constituents' opinions. Scientifically designed polls are apolitical, presumably, and therefore aid legislators in accurately assessing citizens' attitudes. As will be shown in forthcoming chapters, Crossley's notion of the apolitical poll has been replaced by a highly politicized enterprise. Pollsters are now routinely divided into partisan camps; poll questions often ask about political adversaries.

Two years after Crossley wrote his article in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae enriched and advanced his arguments in *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-Opinion Poll and How It Works*. Political polling, they claimed, would not only restore and enhance representative democracy, but was necessary for representative democracy to flourish. Dismissing interest groups' stated positions and citizens' vocal expressions as cacophony, Gallup and Rae claimed that legislators needed polls to locate public opinion. "[I]n this day of pressure groups, telegram barrages, and other forms of protest," Gallup and Rae said, "the worried legislator must cope with such techniques and therefore may mistakenly identify all the noise and clamor with public opinion."²⁷ They concluded with an elegant testimony for political polling:

That is why public-opinion polls are important today. Instead of being attempts to sabotage representative government, kidnap the members of Congress, and substitute the taxi driver for the expert in politics, as some critics insist, public-opinion research is a necessary and valuable aid to truly representative government. The continuous studies of public opinion will merely *supplement*, not destroy, the work of representatives. What is evident here is that representatives will be better able to represent if they have an accurate measure of the wishes, aspirations, and needs of different groups within the general public, rather than the kind of distorted picture sent them by telegram enthusiasts and overzealous pressure groups who claim to speak for all the people, but actually speak only for themselves. Public-opinion surveys will provide legislators with a new instrument for estimating trends of opinion, and minimize the chances of their being fooled by clamoring minorities. For the alternative to these surveys, it must be remembered, is not a perfect and still silence in which the Ideal Legislators and the Perfect Expert can commune on desirable policies. It is the real world of competing pressures, vociferous demonstrations, and the stale cries of party politics.²⁸

²⁷ George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-Opinion Poll and How It Works*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940, p. 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 266–267. Over a decade after Lehman, Crossley, and Gallup and Rae's warnings about the dangers of pressure groups as inaccurate reflectors of the public mood, William Albig admonished scholars who ignored the role of pressure groups as representing the public at large. "Large publics preserve the sentiments of the culture in which they live, and frequently exhibit the ability to choose with reasonable accuracy among the proposals which come from leaders and from that stratum of the general public which is more broadly knowledgeable. The contribution of sentiment and of restraint on the excesses of special interest groups must not be underestimated." William Albig, "Two Decades of Opinion Study: 1936–1956," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1956): 22.

To Gallup and Rae, polls were the most viable antidote to the biased portrait of American opinions presented by pressure groups that misrepresent the direction and intensity of public opinion. Presidents have accepted and extended Gallup and Rae's claims; private polls are more accurate than alternative assessments of public opinion, and have provided autonomy from those political institutions wishing to derail presidential objectives.

PRIVATE SECTOR MARKET RESEARCH, THE *LITERARY DIGEST*
DEBACLE AND THE "SCIENCE" OF POLLING

Government did not take the lead in creating modern surveys. Rather, polls were already developed somewhat in the private sector. Market researchers in the 1920s played a key role in advancing methods of assessing citizens' attitudes. The pioneers of polling began their careers as market researchers. Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley both note how the private sector initiated the use of market research.²⁹ In what reads like an oral history of his trade, Crossley recalls touring New York City advertising agencies, and finding both Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn (later known as BBD&O), and the Curtis Publishing Company, as having active "research" departments. These and other research departments primarily, but not entirely, dealt with monitoring media usage for their clients. Who, for example, listened to the radio? What advertisements might appeal to these listeners, and what commercials were broadcast on certain radio stations? The modern public opinion poll's roots lie in the private sector's attempts to market products for consumers.

Eventually and not surprisingly, primitive polling methods were sometimes deemed inaccurate. Straw polls, man-in-the-street polls, and mail-in polls were replaced by advances made by George Gallup, who used randomization and quota sampling to discern opinions from a large public without asking questions to each member of that public. If, for example, Gallup knew that sixty percent of a given region was comprised of Catholics, Gallup sought to approximate the proportion of Catholics in the sample of that region. When other pollsters used alternative methods, Gallup was quick to denounce them as unscientific and inaccurate.

Arguably the most infamous inaccuracies emanated from the 1936 *Literary Digest* poll, which used lists of telephone and car owners and its own magazine subscribers as instruments from which to generate a poll sample. The *Digest* poll showed Republican Alf Landon defeating President Roosevelt. Gallup proclaimed the *Literary Digest* poll a disaster before the election as he simultaneously promoted his more scientific polling methods.

²⁹ Archibald M. Crossley, "Early Days of Public Opinion Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 159-164; and Elmo Roper, "The Client over the Years," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 28-32.

Although George Gallup is widely regarded as the first person to discredit the unscientific methods of the *Literary Digest* poll, detailed criticisms of the *Digest* poll were published in 1933 by Robert C. Brooks in a book entitled *Political Parties and Electoral Problems*. Brooks, then a professor of political science at Swarthmore College, noted how the volume of responses to the *Digest's* straw polls miserably failed in predicting the voting outcomes at the state level.

[I]ndeed the *Digest* poll gave Hoover these states [Massachusetts and Rhode Island] by a two to one vote whereas Smith carried both of them by scant margins. Examination of the forecasts for both 1924 and 1928 shows that in each of these years the *Digest* overestimated the Republican and underestimated the Democratic percentage of the vote actually cast in the November elections. . . . Of course it is easy to explain away minor errors in forecasting as due to a last minute shift on the part of voters but the discrepancies just noted are much too large to be airily disposed of in that manner.³⁰

Brooks and Gallup's objections to the *Digest* polls were based on their faulty sampling and poor predictive powers – in short, they thought the *Digest* was using poor social scientific methods. Gallup recalled that criticisms of his poll methods prevailed long after he correctly predicted FDR's 1936 victory over Landon:

Some claimed we were not measuring public opinion; public opinion could not be measured, at least not by the procedures we were using. Others said we were not scientific. Still others thought we were an evil force which might lead the country straight to Hell – or to direct democracy, which they regarded as equally terrifying. An Oregon congressman introduced a bill to curb polls. The fight was on.³¹

Gallup astutely recognized that criticism of polls was based on the belief that their samples and questions were more an art than a science, in part because some of his public opinion colleagues thought of their work as part art and part science. The title of Stanley Payne's seminal work, *The Art of Asking Questions*, written in 1951, exemplified how questionnaire design was considered, in part, a nonscientific enterprise. Political legitimacy therefore demanded that science be the backbone of survey research. But failures endured, especially after Gallup's 1948 polls incorrectly predicted that Thomas Dewey would defeat President Harry Truman. Nonetheless, Gallup informed the public not only that his polls were viable and reliable, but that they were scientifically rigorous.

I would like to bring up another long-standing complaint of those of us who conduct polls. This is the use of quotation marks around the word 'scientific' when applied to

³⁰ Robert C. Brooks, *Political Parties and Electoral Problems, Third Edition*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933, p. 352.

³¹ George Gallup, "The Changing Climate for Public Opinion Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 24.

polls. If our work is not scientific, then no one in the field of social science, and few of those in the natural sciences, have a right to use the word. Even under the most rigid interpretation of the word I venture to say that our work fully qualifies.³²

Gallup insisted that polls were beneficial to democracy in part because of their scientific nature. Whether or not polling enhanced democracy was part of the political and intellectual discourse. In 1946, John C. Ranney questioned if polling methods improved democracy simply because polls were ostensibly more accurate than alternative methods. He argued that politicians need not concern themselves with the public's opinions, but rather the opinions of "specific organizations and individuals inside his constituency, especially the political machines and the organized pressure groups." Unless polls targeted these groups as respondents, polls were asking questions to the wrong people.³³

After the debacle of 1948, the publication of Lindsay Rogers' *The Pollsters* further magnified public criticisms of opinion polls. Rogers criticized pollsters' pollyannaish views of the merits of polling. Perhaps there are times, he said, when the government should ignore polls and not listen to the pulse of the public. If this were so, then pollsters and their supporters should address the normative question of when democratic leaders should ignore public opinion. Additionally, Rogers argued that the amorphous, multidimensional nature of public opinion prevented it from being measured by polls with accuracy. He cited Carroll Mason Sparrow, who argued that "frantic efforts to imitate physics" in the social sciences were doomed to fail. "Instead of being willing to take their subject-matter for what it is, these mensurationists try to deck it out in misfit garments."³⁴

Despite the scientific underpinnings of public opinion research advanced by Gallup, Roper, Crossley, and others, some studies of public opinion in the 1940s retained a qualitative flavor. Only in the 1950s, Bernard Berelson argued, did the field of public opinion become "a part of science," that was "technical and quantitative, atheoretical, segmented, and particularized, specialized and institutionalized, 'modernized' and 'group-ized' – in short, as a characteristic behavioral science, Americanized."³⁵ As polls gained scientific

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

³³ John C. Ranney, "Do Polls Serve Democracy?," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10 (1946): 352.

³⁴ Carroll Mason Sparrow, "Measurement and Social Science." In *Voyages and Cargoes, University of Virginia Studies, Vol. III*. Richmond: Dietz Press, Charlottesville, University of Virginia, 1947, p. 176.

³⁵ Bernard Berelson, "The Study of Public Opinion." In *The State of the Social Sciences*, edited by Leonard D. White. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956, pp. 304–305. Berelson continues his discussion by delineating the development of public opinion as a scientific field. "For if there was one factor that influenced the shift from 1930 to 1955 more than any other, it was surely the 'invention' and development of a method – the sample survey" (*ibid.*, 309). He concludes on a less sanguine note by noting that although the methods of measuring and sampling have improved, it was in the theoretical vein that the scientific field of public

and academic legitimacy, their usage increased – by presidents and others. Presidents' pollsters today serve as unofficial public relations consultants, and do so with scientific techniques that fortify their roles as technical gurus who have the secrets of politics at their fingertips. Senior White House advisers entrust these presidential pollsters to interpret the data for the president, largely because they command a more thorough understanding of the statistical techniques and polling technology that are being used. In this regard, the evolution of presidential polling is explained by the rise of social science methods. Forthcoming chapters will delineate how presidential pollsters use these methods, and in doing so, serve key roles in guiding and interpreting presidential agendas.

THE SIMULTANEOUS INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PRESIDENTIAL PRESS RELATIONS AND PROPAGANDA

Techniques of advancing presidential public relations complement the birth of modern polling methods. Political scientist Elmer Cornwell contends that the presidential press conference served as an important bridge between the chief executive and the citizenry by popularizing the presidency. President Wilson introduced biweekly press conferences, and after President Harding's unexpected death, President Calvin Coolidge used press conferences to connect with an American public that had not elected him. According to Cornwell, Coolidge realized how the press, especially the radio medium, could be used to create personalized news:

The usual and ordinary man is not the source of very much news. But the [press] boys have been very kind and considerate to me, and where there has been any discrepancy, they have filled it in and glossed it over, and they have manufactured some.³⁶

Coolidge constantly met with the members of the media because he knew that they would fill in media vacuums with stories about his presidency. Coolidge rarely declined an opportunity to pose for pictures or to chat with the press, allowing them to join him on his vacations away from Washington, D.C. On April 14, 1917, President Wilson transformed this relationship by establishing the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Chaired by George Creel, a loyal Wilson supporter and former journalist, the Creel Committee as it later became known, was "a major factor underlying this growing tendency to see the Federal Government personified in Presidential terms."³⁷ The Creel Committee's function was to educate the citizenry about World

opinion research yearned for improvement. Also see Harold D. Lasswell, "The Impact of Public Opinion Research On Our Society," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 33–38.

³⁶ Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., "Coolidge and Presidential Leadership," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 271.

³⁷ Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., "Wilson, Creel, and the Presidency," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23 (1959): 189.