Interest in elucidating citizens’ political sentiments stretches far back into the American past, as well as that of most republican nations. Since at least the eighteenth century, when the term public opinion first surfaced, representative governments have claimed to be able to locate—as well as listen and respond to—the will of the people. As James Madison argued in 1791, the “opinion of the majority” was the “real sovereign in every free government.” Public opinion, whether deemed virtuous, unruly, or in need of enlightened guidance, became part of the rhetorical arsenal of rulers and elites who claimed to speak in its name. Collective opinion about public affairs was also thought to exercise a shaping force on citizens. In the words of political philosopher John Locke, “the law of opinion, the law of reputation, the law of fashion . . . is heeded more than any divine law or any law of the state.”

In the United States, where democratic rule and political legitimacy were firmly tied to majority will, assessing the national mood was a favorite pastime of journalists, politicians, and social commentators long before Gallup appeared on the scene. Political scientist Susan Herbst has observed that “technically sophisticated attempts to quantify popular sentiment trailed far behind theorizing and discussion of it.”

Starting in the nineteenth century, rudimentary political surveys, whether for entertainment or electoral gain, were undertaken by reporters, party loyalists, and ordinary citizens. In the 1820s, partisan newspapers began conducting straw polls as a means of both calculating and swaying political contests. “Straws,” named for the way a straw held up in the wind could determine which way it was blowing, were haphazard instruments for gauging opinion, with passengers on a train or people encountered during a phase of a political campaign polled as the entire sample. Regardless, these quantitative surveys were popular news features into the twentieth century, encouraging a “horse race” approach to reporting elections that continues to the present.

Origins of the Modern Opinion Poll
A conjunction of statistical and social scientific innovations, commercial demands, and journalistic trends led to more systematic public opinion surveys in the first decades of the twentieth century and ultimately to the “scientific” polling of the 1930s. The estimation of standard errors based on sample size was crucial to pollsters’ ability to extrapolate from the views of a small group of respondents something like national public opinion on a given issue. Equally significant were developments in the burgeoning field of market research, which sought ever more precise gauges of consumer desires and, in the process, supplied the techniques and personnel for political research. Finally, media interest in public opinion as news guaranteed that the polls would have both audiences and financial backers.
But the rise of modern political polling also required the entrepreneurial skills of Gallup and his colleagues. All of them got their start (and remained) in private commercial research and aspired to extend sample survey techniques to other arenas. In the lead-up to the 1936 presidential election, Gallup, along with Roper and Crossley, publicly challenged the best-known straw poll of the day, conducted by the Literary Digest. The Digest poll had correctly predicted the winner of the past five elections. But in 1936, even though it tallied over 2 million mail-in ballots, the poll incorrectly called the election for Republican Alfred Landon. Gallup et al., on the other hand, surveyed significantly fewer but more representative individuals and correctly forecast the election, if not the actual percentage of votes (Gallup was off by 7 points), for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Their victory gave instant credibility to scientific opinion polls, based on careful cross sections of the national population—what Gallup called the “miniature electorate.”

Gallup and Roper, and soon a corps of other “pollers,” were not content to confine their efforts to electoral contests. Indeed, many believed that election polls, although good for business and for legitimating their techniques in the public eye, were socially useless. The real goal was, in Gallup’s words, “charting virtually unexplored sectors of the public mind”: polling citizens on social and political issues that never made it onto a ballot. With this aim in mind, Gallup’s American Institute for Public Opinion (AIPO) was established in 1935 to conduct a “continuing poll on the issues of the day.” By 1940 its reports of Americans’ opinions, on topics ranging from working women to U.S. entrance into World War II, were syndicated and carried by 106 newspapers. Roper’s Fortune Survey, also created in 1935, had a similar goal, if never as wide a following.

James Bryce, author of The American Commonwealth, suggested in 1888 that public opinion ought to be “the real ruler of America,” but lamented the lack of “machinery for weighing or measuring the popular will from week to week or month to month.” In his many tracts promoting polling techniques, Gallup portrayed his new technology as the fulfillment of Bryce’s vision.

By this light, opinion polls were more than a method for gathering information. They were a civic instrument, able to revitalize democracy—the spirit, if not the form, of the New England town meeting—in an increasingly complex, bureaucratic nation. Polls would achieve this goal by opening up a direct channel between “the people” and those in power, bypassing unreceptive legislators, political machines, and pressure groups. “As vital issues emerge from the fast-flowing stream of modern life,” pledged Gallup, public opinion polls would “enable the American people to speak for themselves.” Roper similarly described polls as “democracy’s auxiliary ballot box.” In short, the new polls would make ordinary citizens articulate—and their leaders responsive—in an age of mass organization.

In the years after 1916, other individuals, notably Samuel Lubbell, Lou Harris, and Mervin Field, would enter the polling arena, as would government agencies and major survey research organizations such as the National Opinion Research Center (1941), Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research (1944), and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan (1946). Technical improvements in sampling and survey design ensued, although they did not prevent spectacular failures in polling techniques. The polls’ confident prediction that Thomas Dewey would prevail over Harry Truman in the presidential election of 1948 was the best known of these failures, triggering a major investigation by the Social Scientific Research Council and much soul-searching by pollsters, social scientists, journalists, and market research clients.

The relative ease with which polling’s 1948 crisis passed, however, suggested the growing dependence of various sectors of U.S. society on Gallup’s techniques. Opinion polling, along with the allied field of market research, expanded dramatically in the 1960s and beyond, as interest groups, political consultants, and television and news organizations got into the polling business. By the mid-1960s, opinion surveying had spread throughout the world. The Gallup Poll had 32 affiliates and conducted polls in nearly 50 countries. In the early twenty-first-century United States, several hundred polling organizations existed on national, state, or local levels. Quantitative reports based on the aggregation of individual responses had largely displaced older ways of gauging citizens’ views, among them public hearings, petitions, rallies, and letter-writing campaigns.

Polling’s Critics
Gallup’s rosy view of the democratic potential of opinion surveys was never fully embraced by his contemporaries, nor by later observers of the polls. Multiple criticisms were leveled at public opinion polls from their inception and recurred loudly during each new election cycle.

Some critiques were political and came from those who had something to lose or gain from poll numbers. Legislators on both sides of the aisle in the 1930s and 1940s looked skeptically at the new electoral polls, citing bias and distortion. (Early polls often did overestimate Republican support, making Franklin Roosevelt suspect that Gallup was on the opposing party’s payroll.) Beginning in 1932, there were regular proposals in Congress to investigate or regulate the polls, and Gallup himself came under congressional scrutiny in 1944.

Ordinary citizens also denounced what they considered to be slanted or inaccurate polls. But their chief complaint concerned the practice of scientific sampling. To many Americans, the notion that national opinion could be distilled from as few as

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1,000 respondents was not simply counterintuitive but undemocratic. Given the regular claims of polling’s founders to represent the citizenry, many individuals were puzzled—or offended—by the fact that their opinions were not included in the surveys. Especially in the early decades of scientific polling, some were even moved to write to Gallup and Roper to ask why they hadn’t been questioned. Despite the ubiquity of polls in American life today, widespread distrust of their central methodology persists. Over half of Americans surveyed in 1985, for example, claimed not to believe in the representativeness of random sampling.

Some of the most important challenges to the polls came from those who worried that data publicizing majority views would have negative effects in the public arena, due to either the overt manipulation or subtle influence of opinion data. Many legislators, commentators, and citizens from the 1930s onward decried the purported sway of polls over politicians or individual opinions—the latter the so-called bandwagon effect. Although Gallup dismissed this possibility, some studies, including those in the 1940s by sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, suggested that published survey data could indeed influence voters, favoring candidates who were ahead in the polls. In a later iteration of this theme, scholars found that public opinion research could create a “spiral of silence,” dampening minority voices through social pressure.

Other critiques were technical in nature. Pollsters’ early method of choosing respondents, particularly their use of a discretionary system of “quota” sampling, was one area that came under fire. After the fiasco of 1948, most moved to the more costly procedure of “probability,” or random, sampling, where every individual had an equal likelihood of being polled. Academic survey researchers then and now have pointed to other vexing problems with obtaining valid poll results. Among the most important of these are interviewer bias (the potential for the social background of the interviewer and/or respondent to affect responses) and question-wording effects (the fact that Americans register dramatically different levels of support for “welfare” versus “assistance to the poor,” for example).

Still, other criticisms issued from commentators who found poll results like Gallup’s a poor stand-in for something as complex and changeable as “public opinion.” They argued that tallying individual, anonymous responses to standardized questions fundamentally obscured how opinion was forged. Political scientist Lindsay Rogers, who in 1949 coined the term pollster (partly for its resonance with the word huckster), was a vehement early critic of this stripe. In an influential 1948 argument, sociologist Herbert Blumer faulted the polls for severing opinions from their social context: the institutions, groups, and power relations that helped to shape them. Other critics, returning to concerns raised earlier in the century by political commentator Walter Lippmann, wondered whether Gallup’s vision of direct democracy via polls was desirable—that is, whether citizens were capable of wise, informed opinions about complicated public issues.

A host of recent detractors, including French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, further argued that polls do not neutrally report public views but rather generate entirely new entities: “nonattitudes” born of queries about topics that individuals have little knowledge of or interest in; political debates that would not otherwise be on the public agenda; and even the illusion of an opinionated public. In this view, “public opinion”—as revealed by polls—is an artifact of a particular measurement technique and often benefits interested elites such as politicians and journalists rather than the citizenry at large. Arguing that polls have had a disproportionate role in agenda-setting, such critics have urged paying attention to “don’t know” responses and refusals to learn more about what public opinion polls obscure and whom they serve.

In the late twentieth century, frustration with the limitations of polls, and especially their seeming failure to enrich political discourse, led to multiple experiments with polling formats as well as a movement for “deliberative polling,” led by political scientist James Fishkin. Proponents claimed that when citizens were provided with briefing materials on issues and had time to discuss their opinions face to face with others, reasoned collective judgments would result.

Certainly, many parties over the years have welcomed poll data for measuring public preferences as well as the potential to inform political discussion. Polls have clarified major differences between majority sentiment and political leaders. Longitudinal survey data have allowed new windows on ordinary citizens’ political beliefs and affiliations, documenting, for instance, Americans’ remarkably stable policy preferences over time. One recent study concludes that U.S. opinion surveys reveal a “rational public” and, furthermore, that public policy aligns with majority views in approximately two out of three instances. But the range and extent of critiques over the last 70 years suggest that Gallup’s and Roper’s ambitious hopes for polls as the “pulse of democracy” have not yet been realized.

Polls and Civic Life

Notwithstanding such challenges, modern opinion polls and their creators have exercised tremendous influence in American life. Ultimately, Gallup’s surveys managed not only to transform political reportage but also to change politics itself. Polling techniques quickly penetrated the corridors of Congress and the White House. Franklin D. Roosevelt, an early convert to survey data, began receiving three-page summaries of public opinion in 1941; by 1942 these reports were often 20 pages in length. Roosevelt, significantly, monitored polls less to learn the
public opinion polls

markedly compared to social issue polls), quantitative opinion surveys are here to stay.

Historically, public opinion has had many different shades of meaning. In 1965 Harwood Childs, founder of the Public Opinion Quarterly, was able to list some 50 competing definitions for the term. One sign of Gallup’s astonishing success is today’s ready conflation of poll data and public opinion: the near-complete merging of the people’s will and a specific statistical technique for measuring it.

See also political culture.


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