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BOOK REVIEWS

Sarah E. Igo. *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*. Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press. 2007. 408 pp. $35.00 (cloth).

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Most opinion researchers are familiar with the broad history of opinion polling. Gallup, Roper and Crossley start up their enterprises in the 1930s. The polling business stumbles in 1948 with the miscalled Truman–Dewey election, regains its footing in the 1950s and 1960s, and goes on from there to play an important role in politics, media, and social science. But even students of this profession probably do not think much about how the emergence of opinion polling and other popularized forms of social science in the 20th century helped shape a new view of American society.

Sarah E. Igo argues in *The Averaged American* that the birth of polling and the unprecedented popularity of important social science efforts of that era both reflected and furthered a new concept – that of a mass society. In particular, she provides an informative historical perspective on how the work of George Gallup, the Middletown studies of Robert and Helen Lynd, and Alfred Kinsey's research created a new consciousness of a national society, one that was not apparent in the 19th century.

Traditionally, social science focused on the study of social problems, but by the mid-20th century, the common man – the ordinary American – became the subject of newly emergent polling practitioners and some social scientists. In Igo's words, "A history of the surveyor's instruments helps us appreciate how influential they have been in bounding and enforcing perceptions of social reality across the last century" (p. 22). Researchers generally prefer to think of themselves as chroniclers rather than agents of social change, but Igo reverses that focus.

Obviously, social research and polling played a part in the emergence of the concept of a mass public. The new media – radio and film – had a lot to do with it as well, as Igo notes. Her larger point is that "knowledge about ourselves" provided a way for Americans to "perceive a mass society and the incontrovertible evidence of its existence" (p. 6). And, of course, the particular method that the pioneers employed had consequences for the concepts that emerged from their efforts. Their chosen approach was seemingly neutral, fact

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based and quantitative. And their product was statistical, placing emphasis on the midpoint – the average. Hence, the notion of the average American emerges as a basis for the public's collective sense.

Middletown, Gallup, and Kinsey are the case studies Igo employed to mark the mid-century popularization of social science devoted to the study of the typical American. While the three principals in these studies operated in different realms, they shared some common threads. All of them came out of different fields: Gallup from advertising, Robert Lynd from divinity school, and Kinsey from ornithology. All were highly entrepreneurial in the formulation of their work product and its dissemination. Each took the country by storm, and each experienced backlash. Clearly the legacy of Gallup is the greatest, but the contribution of all the three to a national self-consciousness in that era is equally clear.

Igo's portraits of her three subjects are compelling; they are good stories that are generally well told. However, the good story-telling is undermined by the author's somewhat overblown characterization of the perils of quantitative portrayals of the public. In addition, she fails to put in perspective, the inevitable mistakes and false starts of pioneers in a new field of the study. For instance, the Lynds' novel effort was to record and document the lives of ordinary people in an ordinary town rather than to focus on a special group or social problem, as was typical of the social science earlier in the century. While it began as a study of the challenges faced by religious organizations in communities in that era, the project evolved into a broader inquiry into the nature of modern American life, original sponsor intent notwithstanding.

Although the Middletown studies are a well-known milestone along the historical track of American sociology, Igo gives the reader a perspective lacking in standard textbook treatments: a vivid description of how the Middletown story played – its national impact, how it was marketed, and how Middletown residents reacted to all of the above. In the latter regard, it provides a preview of how successive generations of Americans would react to coverage of life in the United States by a media far more intrusive and bent on sensationalism than were *Life* magazine and other media in the 1930s. Citizen complaints about the mischaracterization of the "real Muncie" ever since have bemoaned how polling and the media misportray and distort the real America.

In the end, however, the real import of Middletown was the extent to which the study itself became a national phenomenon reflecting the country's appetite for self-examination and consideration. So too was the work of Gallup and other pollsters as they introduced the public opinion surveys that have come to have such a high profile in American society.

Igo's Gallup portrait gets some things right, and others quite wrong. She is correct in underscoring the extent to which Gallup was invested in the soundness of the judgments of ordinary Americans. Unlike the Lynds, Igo observes, Gallup had confidence in the wisdom of his subjects. Gallup was an advocate of the people, but not of a particular party, nor of business or any other

special interests. His conception of polling as a tool of democracy was central to his way of thinking, as was his desire to do the best job possible of mirroring public opinion.

But Igo's criticisms of Gallup's early election polling methods are generally heavy-handed, and in at least one case, simply wrong. She claims that the early pollsters employed restrictive sampling quotas for pre-election polls that disenfranchised many types of citizens including blacks, women, and less well-educated people. Yes, Gallup and other pollsters did use restrictive sampling quotas in an effort to mirror an *electorate* that was itself restricted. Pollsters today use voter screens in their probability samples and they too include relatively fewer people in groups that vote at lower than average rates, including blacks and the less well-educated. However, then as now, the methodology for pre-election preference polls and general opinion polls was quite different; Gallup employed a broader, more generally representative design for his typical national polls than for his pre-election surveys, as do modern polls.

Igo is right on target in describing the linkage between market research and public polling. In so many respects, the latter was clearly a by-product of the former, not only for Gallup but also for the other pioneers. But she gets carried away in portraying the extent of commercial influence over how the early polls were conducted and what they covered. Gallup did not ignore race relations for fear of alienating Southern newspaper clients, but because these issues were under the radar in the 1940s. A decade later they were not, and Gallup's polls recorded the first public reactions to the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the broader desegregation measures that followed.

Igo makes a good case that the early pollsters provided too little perspective on variations in opinions that were below the surface of their national findings. She describes the pollster's emphasis on majority opinion, and the speaking of the public in the singular voice as oversimplifying and distorting characterizations of mid-century Americans.

However, Igo fails to recognize that the averages and national midpoints had, and continue to have, real value. For example, Gallup's national findings on Americans' consistent reluctance to go to war to support Britain and her allies in their darkest days told the story of the isolationism of that era with a clarity and authority that the pundits of that time might otherwise have chosen to ignore. And Gallup's subsequent reporting of the national unity that emerged once the United States entered the war painted a picture of national consensus not apparent in the polls about all subsequent American wars.

In fact, throughout the book, Igo cannot quite manage to disguise her aversion to the reporting of opinion polling. Basically, she writes it both ways. On the one hand, she notes that beginning in the 1960s, the focus began to shift to diversity, segmentation, and analysis. But she adds that the "recasting of 'the public' into alternative publics, subcultures and counterpublics [*whatever this means*] is not unproblematic" (p. 291). Toillustrate the sad state of the practice,

she drags up focus on group-generated political speak – "soccer moms," "angry white men," and the like – along with problems with the moral values question in the 2004 exit poll.

Igo's historical perspective and some of her basic notions about how social science helped create a national sense of self are interesting. But too often her commentary on the role of public opinion polling in American society becomes one-sided, and, at worst, descends into high toned, but formulaic poll bashing. She spends no time considering the way polls provide a corrective to elite assumptions about what the U.S. public thinks: whether it is presumptions that Americans will demand the impeachment of the president, or the presumption the public is ready for the privatization of Social Security or any other "anointed" policy change. Nor does she mention, even in passing, how polling has improved news reporting about the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of ordinary Americans. Her laments about national characterizations of public opinion ignore the role that key polling indicators – presidential approval, consumer confidence, party affiliation, and so on – play in providing an ongoing, objective record of the national mood that ultimately plays out in ballot boxes, cash registers, and American life generally.

Finally, perhaps Igo's concerns about "averaged" opinions and describing public opinion in a singular voice just might be assuaged if she were to assemble and analyze the overall results of all questions from the national media polls on a major contemporary topic such as Iraq. She would see how just nuanced and textured a portrait they paint of American thinking. If she went on to read the in-depth analysis of these polls that is increasingly available from pollsters and online analysts, she would realize that Dr. Gallup's aspirations to give voice to the people were being realized.