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"A GOLD MINE AND A TOOL FOR DEMOCRACY": GEORGE GALLUP, ELMO ROPER, AND THE BUSINESS OF SCIENTIFIC POLLING, 1935–1955

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"Scientific" public opinion polls arrived on the American scene in 1936. Examining the work of opinion surveyors George Gallup and Elmo Roper, this essay tracks the early career of a new social scientific technology, one that powerfully shaped conceptions of "the public." Pollsters described their craft as a democratic one that could accurately represent the U.S. populace. Yet, their assumptions about that same public—and the techniques they employed to measure it—undermined such claims, and even risked calling the polling profession into question. To understand why Gallup and Roper fell short of their stated ambitions, one must turn not only to the state of midcentury sampling methods but also to the corporate sponsors and commercial pressures underlying their enterprise. © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

"What is the common man thinking?" asked George Gallup in 1940. He claimed to provide "a modern answer on the basis, not of guesswork, but of facts" by announcing the birth of "a new instrument—the public opinion poll" that could "provide a continuous chart of the opinions of the man in the street" (Gallup & Rae, 1940, p. v). Gallup, along with his fellow "scientific" pollsters Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley, made a dramatic entrance onto the national stage in 1936. Each publicly challenged conventional wisdom and the famous *Literary Digest* straw poll, an established survey of millions of Americans that had correctly projected the outcome of the past five presidential elections. All three pollsters supplemented the *Digest*'s mail-in ballot method with one-on-one interviews and, more astonishingly, relied on a fraction of the magazine's respondents to arrive at their forecasts of how Americans would vote. And, unlike the *Literary Digest*, each predicted—correctly, it turned out—that Franklin D. Roosevelt would prevail over the Republican Alfred Landon (Moore, 1992, pp. 31–55; Wheeler, 1976, pp. 67–70; on straw polls, see Herbst, 1993, pp. 69–87; C. E. Robinson, 1932).

Pinning their social scientific instrument to the very public test of an election was risky—and a decision the pollsters may well have regretted later. But the bet paid off, enabling opinion surveyors to make strong claims for their new techniques and what they could reveal about the preferences of "the public." Soon enough, pollsters were not just weighing in on electoral races but also reporting Americans' views on topics ranging from war plans to taxation policies, working women to venereal disease. Just four years after the pollsters' electoral victory, an estimated 8 million people were receiving Gallup's triweekly reports on "What America Thinks" in the form of a syndicated newspaper column (Gallup & Rae, 1940, p. 118). Pollsters' statistical accounts of the majority and their "rhetoric of scientific democracy" (Hogan, 1997) would, over the next several decades, become intertwined with citizens' understandings of the national public.

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Purporting to read the mind of the "man on the street" with new precision, George Gallup and Elmo Roper asserted that opinion polling served the causes of both science and democracy.[1] Theirs, they said, was a scientific innovation that could revitalize public life by transmitting the views of the people to politicians and policymakers. Such claims rested upon the representativeness of their samples, the point at which pollsters' scientific techniques and their democratic ambitions converged. Yet, representing the American public was more difficult than the pollsters usually liked to admit. Journals of opinion research in the 1930s and 1940s were full of uneasy debate about whether questionnaires and interviews were obtaining accurate responses and whether the rather rudimentary techniques of sampling were capturing the true composition of the population. Even if these flaws were rarely aired in pollsters' public pronouncements, the technical problems of their craft surfaced with dismaying regularity in the field. Still deeper problems were built into opinion surveyors' assumptions about the population they sampled. Midcentury notions about the citizenly capacities of women, workers, immigrants, and African Americans colored their search for and portrayal of "the public."

Furthermore, despite external social scientific scrutiny, pollsters did not always adopt refinements in their methods, even those that might have helped them to approximate more closely the population they hoped to measure. Here, the commercial roots and corporate infrastructure of Gallup and Roper's livelihood were crucial. Opinion polling was, from the beginning, an entrepreneurial science that answered not only to "the public" or to the scholarly community of attitude researchers but to the polls' buyers: newspaper publishers, broadcasting companies, and other corporations. Opinion surveyors at times embraced the commercial imperatives of their craft; at others, they chafed under the constraints of the corporate influence they themselves had invited in. This essay examines how the bottom line of business success, coupled with the state of their science and their tentative commitment to representing all Americans, widened the gap between the pollsters' expressed aims and their surveying practices. The institutional and financial structure of the polling industry never fully determined the way Gallup and Roper employed their novel techniques. However, the corporate context in which they worked did affect how far they could push their scientific and democratic claims. It also subtly shaped the sort of public the midcentury polls projected: one more unitary and harmonious than it could have been in reality.

Despite a vast scholarly and critical literature on public opinion polls, stretching from their inception to the present day (see, for example, Spingarn, 1938; Studenski, 1939; Borneman, 1947; Rogers, 1949; Wheeler, 1976; Ginsberg, 1986; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992; Fishkin, 1997; Bishop, 2005), the history of the American polling profession has few chroniclers (for important exceptions, see Converse, 1987, pp. 87–127; Herbst, 1993; and D.J. Robinson, 1999). And yet the polls of the past open an enlightening window on the ways a new and powerful social scientific instrument defined the boundaries not just of public opinion but of "the public" itself. Examining the first two decades of the scientific polling era, I argue that public opinion polls' origins, sponsors, and assumptions all worked against the search for a democratic sample survey technology in the United States.

1. Although Archibald Crossley continued to work in the opinion research field, most prominently in radio surveys, and remained in the business of presidential forecasting, he "did not think the market would bear a third poll of public opinion outside of the presidential campaign season" (Converse, 1987, p. 112). He made the decision to stay in market research almost exclusively, which is the reason I do not trace his career here.

Polling for Science and Democracy

The results of scientific public opinion polls were meant to be representative and generalizable. Comparing the modern poll to the partisan straw polls that newspapers had been conducting since 1824, Gallup and his colleagues placed themselves in the camp of empiricism, efficiency, and progress. They substituted "candid-camera studies" for "impressionistic and florid descriptions," systematically culled data for erratic local knowledge (Gallup & Rae, 1940, p. 127). Part of a movement away from the straw poll and community survey and toward modern sampling techniques in the 1930s, opinion researchers developed quantitative methods and human networks that allowed a tiny cross-section of Americans of different regions, classes, and races to stand for the whole. The techniques for creating the modern science of polling had emerged, piecemeal, over the first few decades of the century, most notably with Harvard professor Theodore Brown's development of statistical methods for estimating standard errors based on sample size in 1935. (Key figures in the development of modern sample surveying in the United States were Rensis Likert, Samuel Stouffer, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Robert Merton. See Bulmer, 1996; Kruskal & Mosteller, 1980; Stephan, 1948; and Turner & Martin, 1984. For the history of techniques for estimating probability, see Gigerenzer et al., 1989; Hacking, 1990; Porter, 1986; and Stigler, 1986).

Opinion surveyors in the two decades following 1935 devised ever more rigorous procedures for measuring the public, refining everything from the way they designed their questionnaires to the way they trained their interviewers and constructed their samples. This quest was propelled as much by their professional interest in an improved science of opinion gathering as by the relentless scrutiny to which they were subject from academics, public commentators, and others from outside the surveyors' ranks. For example, knowing that the *Literary Digest*'s failure in 1936 had stemmed from the social class distortions of a mail-in ballot method drawn from lists of automobile and telephone owners, Gallup and Roper gained access in the early days of opinion polling to the lower economic echelons, particularly "reliefers," by supplementing mail ballots with personal interviews. Finding interviews a more controlled method for getting at the right public and eliciting honest answers, they abandoned postcard ballots of any kind soon after 1936.

Similarly, pollsters slowly moved over the course of the 1940s and early 1950s toward more precise techniques of quota, area, and "pin-point" sampling (Hogan, 1997, p. 165). The act of questioning itself went through several modifications. A reporter who accompanied Gallup interviewers as they worked in three different cities in 1940 noted not only that "phrasing the ballots is a nightmare in semantics" but also that the individual interviewers' measurements of strength of opinion were highly erratic (Wechsler, 1940, pp. 65–66). Methods for testing bias in question wording (the "split-ballot technique") and measuring respondents' intensity of opinion and depth of knowledge (the "quintamensional plan of question design") were developed by surveyors in subsequent years, given impressive scientific monikers, and trotted out to critics and competitors alike (Gallup, 1947; Hogan, 1997, pp. 169–170).

For Gallup, who always placed "Doctor" in front of his name, measuring public opinion required a "'laboratory' attitude of mind" and researchers "trained in the scientific method" who excised bias through "constant vigilance, self-questioning, and experiment." His polling organization was not content to rest there. Gallup's American Institute for Public Opinion (AIPO) announced that it was gradually "building up a neutral vocabulary—a public-opinion glossary—within the comprehension of the mass of people" so as to ensure absolutely accurate results from its questioning (Gallup & Rae, 1940, pp. 93, 106). The founder of the Gallup Poll had in fact preached the virtues of a science of opinion beginning with his newspaper

readership studies in graduate school. As he put it in 1930, the "stock methods of measuring reader interest have proven inaccurate and untrustworthy. Protest letters and fan letters, conversations of editors' friends, contests, questionnaires, interviews, and numerous other devices cannot be accepted because of their obvious deficiencies as a yard-stick of opinion." His method, on the other hand, provided "definite and reliable information, capable of statement in quantitative terms" (Gallup, 1930, p. 1). Years later, Gallup told audiences and readers that his methodological rigor was in the service of a scientific ideal: because he believed "it is terribly important that we learn how to predict human behavior" (Gallup, 1951).

Gallup merged this scientific vocabulary with a democratic one, as did the rest of his colleagues in the field. Pollsters' public statements were leavened with a stirring populist rhetoric. The founder of the Gallup Poll advertised his craft as a fail-safe method for conveying the national will, one that could marshal Americans' collective intelligence to solve common problems. As he put it, the new polls applied "scientific methods to the old problem of finding out what the people of this free-thinking, free-speaking democracy wish to do with their society" (Gallup, 1940a, p. 23). Especially in an era of big government increasingly distant from the people, opinion surveys could make "the mass articulate" (Gallup, 1938, p. 133). Regular polls would cure many of the ills of the existing political system, combating the deleterious influence of unresponsive legislatures, political machines, and pressure groups, all of whom the pollster described as "minorities representing themselves as the majority." Asserted Gallup, "As vital issues emerge from the fast-flowing stream of modern life, the public-opinion polls . . . enable the American people to speak for themselves." He never tired of quoting James Bryce, the 1888 author of *The American Commonwealth*, who in his hopes for the active role of public opinion in governing national affairs looked forward to a day when "the will of the majority of citizens [would] become ascertainable at all times" (Gallup & Rae, 1940, pp. 144, 4, 125; Gallup, 1936, pp. 73–74). Finally in the twentieth century, the pollster argued, there were technical means at hand allowing Bryce's vision to become reality.

Elmo Roper similarly viewed the polls as a route to the real voice of the public, bypassing others who spoke in their name such as newspaper editors, political commentators, and "so-called 'thought leaders'" (Roper, 1942a). He aligned himself with "the people," presenting his surveys as the instrument by which ordinary Americans' voices could become audible. Indeed, he, like Gallup, contended that polls were more representative, more democratic even than elections since they ascertained the views of those who never made it to the voting booth. Public opinion polls, he trumpeted in the *New York Herald Tribune*, were "democracy's auxiliary ballot box" (Roper & Woodward, 1948). Moreover, polls would heighten democratic prospects in the nation at large. "Certainly we will have a constantly improving electorate," declared Roper, "now that good newspapers, good magazines and good radio stations bring to the man in the street the news of events and the views of other men" (Roper, 1944). Such was the sales pitch of the scientific pollsters, anyway. But grand claims for technical innovations and populist outcomes hid an equally powerful force behind the polls—that is, profits.

The Commercial Roots of Public Opinion Research

Polling techniques, Elmo Roper knew, were not just a "tool for democracy"; they were also a "gold mine" (Roper, 1968, p. 20). The rise of social and political issue polling, as Jean Converse and Daniel Robinson have ably documented, was inextricably tied to commercial research, and the boundary between the two fields was porous. Indeed, the latter

has argued that "opinion polling developed conceptually and methodologically largely as an adjunct of consumer surveying" (Converse, 1987, pp. 87–127; D. J. Robinson, 1999, p. 6). In a 1940 speech to a business audience, Roper himself granted chronological preeminence to the marketers, claiming that it was "the advertising men" who deserved credit for "the early development of the technique which has been evolved for sampling public opinion" (Roper, 1940b; see also Roper, 1940a, p. 325). The careers of George Gallup and Elmo Roper are thus emblematic of the primary route to public opinion research in the 1920s and 1930s. Both men came to polling not from the field of academic attitude research, which emerged just after World War I, or even from the nineteenth-century journalistic straw poll tradition, but from the world of business.

Once a traveling salesman, Elmo Roper was first exposed to the power of surveys when criss-crossing the country in 1933 on behalf of the jewelry company where he was employed, querying stores about which engagement and wedding rings were selling and why.[2] Richardson Wood at J. Walter Thompson's advertising agency got wind of the survey and was intrigued. As Roper later recalled, "[T]hat was the first time in my life that I had ever heard the words 'marketing research.'" He was soon introduced to Paul Cherington, a professor at Harvard's School of Business; the two joined up with Wood to form a market research consulting practice in New York. Roper eventually created his own firm in 1937, taking on corporate clients such as the American Meat Institute, Standard Oil, the Tea Bureau, Ford Motor Company, Time Inc., the National Broadcasting Company, RCA-Victor, and Spiegel Inc.

Two years beforehand, Roper's other career—public opinion polling—was inaugurated when he became the director of *Fortune* magazine's first-of-its-kind Quarterly Survey. Aimed at a "business-oriented audience," the poll experimented with sampling and personal interviews to arrive at an index to national trends in opinion. By 1938, Roper's survey was coming out monthly, and he had launched another project for *Fortune*, the "Consumer Outlook," which charted subjective attitudes toward the economy. While the main line of his business was always business, Roper, through these national surveys, quickly became known as an expert on public opinion. Sought out for his expertise during World War II, he became a deputy director of the Office of Strategic Services, responsible for public opinion research, and a special consultant to the War Production Board and the Office of War Information. More crucial to his popular reputation, Roper penned a weekly column titled "What People Are Thinking" for the *New York Herald Tribune* and syndicated papers beginning in 1944, hosted a weekly radio program called "Where the People Stand" for CBS beginning in 1948, and then NBC beginning in 1952, and served regularly as a television commentator.

Just a few months after the appearance of Roper's *Fortune* Survey in 1935, George Gallup's first syndicated national poll, "America Speaks," arrived upon the scene. But Gallup, who would become the best known of the pollsters, had been interested in tapping into public opinion as far back as 1922, when as an undergraduate at the State University of Iowa he had taken a summer job canvassing local homes for readers' opinions about the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. This, and his own involvement in campus journalism, led to his PhD dissertation of 1928 in applied psychology at Iowa, entitled "An Objective Method for Determining Reader Interest in the Content of a Newspaper." Financed by Gardner Cowles Jr., the newspaper publisher who would later create *Look* magazine with the assistance of the pollster's marketing insights, Gallup's dissertation—and the readership studies he conducted during his short

2. The information in this and the next paragraph is drawn from D. J. Robinson (1999), Converse (1987), and Roper (1968).

tenure as a professor of journalism at Iowa, Drake, and Northwestern Universities—attracted more than mere scholarly attention (Converse, 1987, pp. 114–116; Gallup, 1976; Hawbaker, 1993; Hubler, 1940; D. J. Robinson, 1999, pp. 39–63). Poring through newspaper issues page-by-page with respondents to find out precisely which articles they had read (comic strips, obituaries, and features much more so than international news and editorials, it turned out) became known in the marketing world as the "Gallup Method" (Brandenburg, 1932; Gallup, 1930, 1957). Lever Brothers was the first to take advantage of its creator's expertise, contacting Gallup the day after hearing about his readership studies and signing him on as an advertising consultant in 1931. The Hearst Sunday papers and General Foods were not far behind. Young and Rubicam hired Gallup the next year as its director of research (Gallup, 1949b, 1962, 1982).

Gallup remained in Young and Rubicam's employ for fifteen years. It was during this time, on weekends, at lunch breaks, and in the evenings, that he created what became known as the Gallup Poll. The *Literary Digest* had performed some issue polling once a year, notably on attitudes toward Prohibition (C. E. Robinson, 1932, pp. 147–162). Gallup, though, had the brainstorm of "polling on every major issue—a continuing poll on issues of the day," an idea that easily gained the support of the Publishers' Syndicate (Gallup, 1962, pp. 119–120). As with Roper, issue polling was Gallup's second hat, the work he was known for but not that which made him a living. Lucrative ventures like Audience Research Inc.—which Gallup co-founded in 1937 as a consulting firm to movie makers such as Walt Disney, Paramount, and David Selznick—and the Opinion Research Corporation, which he established a year later, would take care of that (Ohmer, 1991).

Information gathering of the latter sort was far more profitable than collecting opinions on the issues of the day, which was not pegged to specific commercial products. Gallup nonetheless created a virtual polling empire with the 1935 founding of the American Institute for Public Opinion (AIPO) in New York and Princeton, New Jersey, adding international affiliates in subsequent years. Its regular reports, first issued weekly but soon two and then three and four times a week, were published in major metropolitan newspapers across the nation: 60 of them in 1935 and 106 by 1940 (Gallup Poll News Release Schedule, 1935–1991; O'Malley, 1940, p. 20). Upon its first release, "America Speaks" was called by *News-Week* the "most ambitious newspaper feature ever devised ("Poll," 1935, p. 23). Gallup's name was on its way to becoming virtually synonymous with opinion polling. He, like Roper, would be sought out by politicians as well as corporations and the federal government for his skills in reading the public's mind.

The commingling of marketing and other kinds of opinion research was by no means unusual. Gallup and Roper, along with pollsters such as Archibald Crossley, Hadley Cantril, and Henry Link, made no bones about their involvement in commercial research. Gallup, who won the first of many awards for his "distinguished contribution to advertising research" in 1935, emphasized the similarities in "how people think . . . from politics to tooth paste" ("Contributions of George Gallup to Advertising," n.d.; Gallup, n.d.).[3] Roper told a business audience in 1940 that he would rather be known as a "Marketing Consultant" than a "Poll-Taker" (Roper, 1940b). Articles by commercial and academic surveyors on public relations,

3. Gallup won *Advertising and Selling*'s annual advertising award in 1935, the Advertising Gold Medal Award in 1965, the Parlin Award of the American Marketing Association in 1965, the Christopher Columbus International Prize for Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Communications in 1966, and the Distinguished Achievement Award of the New Jersey chapter of the American Marketing Association in 1975.

Democratic versus Republican strength on different issues, characteristics of radio and newspaper audiences, and sampling methodology coexisted in the pages of the field's primary journal, the *Public Opinion Quarterly*.[4] University-based scholars who conducted attitude research did not shy away from discussions of measurement and prediction simply because the topic was of keen interest to advertisers (see, for example, Churchman, Ackoff, & Wax, 1947).

Opinion surveying itself was a business and, in multiple senses, market-driven. Gallup, for example, had entered the polling field in part because he knew that the straw polls newspapers ran every four years were already popular with the public ("Polling America," 1935). Marketing experience also influenced the very way Roper and Gallup sold their polls. Of his work persuading various military figures to use public opinion research, Roper later recalled: "I saw it, really . . . from the standpoint of making the sale. . . . Roosevelt had already been pretty well sold on public opinion research, and a number of others were. But here now, the most important unit was really the War Production Board, and the Army and the Navy and Air Force, and public opinion research was sold to all of them at the time" (Roper, 1968, pp. 31–42). Gallup's years of research into what caught the newspaper-reader's eye meant that in promoting his American Institute of Public Opinion, he knew just how to build brand-name recognition.[5] He also labored to market the polls as a disinterested scientific technology and public service. One reporter, noting these tactics, observed that the AIPO suggested "anything but a business house engaged in the sale of information." He remarked, "to understand Dr. Gallup's polls it seems necessary to dig through several layers of hocus-pocus" and pointed to "the odor of science which somehow attaches itself to promotion material" (Wharton, 1936, p. 30).

Opinion surveyors were acutely aware that maintaining a united front enhanced their professional image as a group of seekers after scientific truth. Roper wrote in 1942 of Gallup, "[E]very time I see his name prominently mentioned as an authority I feel proud of what he has done to further the interest of public opinion research rather than in any way resentful" (Roper to W. Thorsen, June 24, 1942, Roper Correspondence). Considering themselves pioneers in a new and insecure field, would-be competitors regularly banded together for the good of their infant industry. The community of pollsters corresponded regularly about ways to ensure the legitimacy of the profession, whether through having a neutral group evaluate their electoral forecasts or ensuring that the news syndicates that published their polls did not make invidious claims about the others. "I think you will agree that no one in the business profits by . . . internecine strife," wrote Gallup to Roper and Crossley (Gallup to E. Roper and A. Crossley, October 8, 1948, Roper Correspondence). Here, he meant profits of both the tangible and intangible sort.

More fundamentally, all of its practitioners acknowledged that polling as a profession depended fundamentally on corporate support. Polls like Gallup's were the most expensive syndicated features newspapers had ever run and were only feasible because client newspapers subscribed to them. Simply maintaining staffs of field interviewers incurred steep costs. In 1940, the AIPO was employing a thousand part-time field interviewers who ran up bills of $1,600 a week for their part in conducting Gallup's surveys, and this represented only the

4. The *Quarterly*'s "current research" section drew articles from the fields of "economics, history, sociology, politics, social psychology, journalism, advertising, market research, and radio broadcasting." See *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1 (April 1937), p. 84.

5. Well aware of the power of images, Gallup carefully chose the Institute's name and logo, an image of the capitol building, for their positive and prestigious associations; he also selected Princeton as the location for his institute in part because it provided "a good, academic-sounding date line" (Gallup, 1949b; O'Malley, 1940, p. 23).

pretabulating expenditures (O'Malley, 1940, p. 23). A member of the AIPO office, itself a for-profit venture, noted in the late 1930s that only market research dollars allowed Gallup to "keep the thing alive financially" (D. J. Robinson, 1999, p. 48). Similarly, corporations "paid the rent" for Roper's *Fortune* Survey, which otherwise would have been an unthinkable proposition for the publisher (Roper, 1968, p. 25). The production cost of such surveys meant that links to business were deeply rooted in the very structure of the polling profession, and that private market research always subsidized the public polls. These corporate ties could delimit pollsters' pronouncements, affecting when and where they could expound upon American attitudes. Responding to a 1946 inquiry about participating in a radio show devoted to public opinion, for example, Roper noted that he could not be involved if the program was sponsored by a competitor of any of his commercial clients (L. A. Kamins to Roper, July 30, 1946, and Roper to L. A. Kamins, August 9, 1946, Roper Correspondence).

The polling field depended upon its allegiance to commerce in one further sense. In the years that opinion surveying was at its most vulnerable, market research tended to legitimize the polls. Gallup and Roper both praised commercial research for its rigor, and for the incentives—profitable accounts—that kept it so. Some, such as market surveyor Alfred Politz, in fact stressed the superiority of marketing to political opinion research. He considered pollsters' sampling methods inadequate and wrote in 1948 that "it is very regrettable that the story has been circulated among the population as a whole and among sociologists and industrialists in particular that a successful presidential election forecast is a scientific achievement, that hitting the right ratio of Roosevelt and Dewey voters proves the ability to hit the right ratio of butter purchases, magazine readers, radio listeners, etc." To his mind, the "sensationalism" of election polls had slowed innovation and accuracy in opinion research. Polling provided entertainment; market research, on the other hand, furnished serious data, and Politz believed that "where business success and failure are involved," precise scientific methods would necessarily prevail (Politz, 1948/1990a, p. 49; 1952/1990b, p. 94). What Politz did not adequately understand was that business success and failure were just as constitutive of the pollster's trade as the marketer's. The very existence of both enterprises depended upon a steady flow of clients, and those clients, in theory anyway, demanded accuracy. Surely market researchers would go out of business were they not "right" went the logic, and the same went for pollsters, underwritten as they were by subscribing newspapers and broadcasting corporations. Unlike purely academic studies, the polls' test in dollars and cents was a sign of their consequence.

The nexus of consumer and social opinion research was evident in the daily operation of survey organizations. Most—for example, the Psychological Corporation—did not bother to discriminate between opinion polls and consumer surveys but undertook both kinds of research (Parten, 1950, p. 40). Gallup used "the same tactics, and sometimes the same staff of assistants" for his Young and Rubicam work as he did for his Institute polls. And the AIPO merged the two fields completely in its "omnibus" surveys that asked the same respondents questions designed for corporate clients and the Gallup Poll (O'Malley, 1940, p. 21).[6]

6. It is worth noting the even tighter links between marketing practices and private polls conducted for political candidates. Private polling escalated in the late 1950s, with pollsters taking in approximately $1 million for these services in the 1956 and 1958 election seasons. As one 1959 article put it, "[T]he beauty of a private poll . . . is that the candidate (or party) who buys it can make public any favorable findings and surpress [*sic*] the unfavorable parts. It is his property. Relations between the pollster and his client are confidential" (Bigart, 1959). This was precisely the same relationship that existed between market surveyors and their clients. A 1959 *Newsweek* article devoted to private pollsters reported that "in unprecedented numbers, the political pollsters were at work this week and most of them were seeking not information for the public alone, but for the private guidance of high office-seekers" ("They're Off—Running Like '60," 1959).

Pollsters and their funders presumed that surveys of purchasing habits were no different than those of social issues—and that the skills of a market researcher were identical to those of a measurer of political sentiment (D. J. Robinson, 1999).

Indeed, polls on the issues were conceived of as a direct correlate to surveyors' market research ventures, which purportedly allowed the public to speak its mind to the corporations. Much as Gallup described opinion polls as a way for the people's voice to be heard in the distant corridors of political power, Roper claimed that market research revived the older "direct contacts" between small manufacturers and their customers—the days when the heads of manufacturing plants were "close to the public" and had a "good knowledge of what the consumer wanted." The populist promise of such surveying was well expressed in his statement that it was "the public's turn to say to the manufacturer, 'You'll make what we want, in the shape we want, in the color we want, and sell it at the price we want to pay or else we will exercise our inalienable right to refuse to buy your goods'" (Roper, 1942b).

Thus, for true believers, the promise of consumer surveys and opinion polling was the same. Each field announced the dawn of a new possibility: that of knowing the "mass mind," as Roper put it (Roper, January 2, 1949, CBS Broadcasts). This alliance between market research and other branches of opinion canvassing may have kept pollsters from seeing—or, at any rate, acknowledging—the potentially manipulative aspects of their trade. Pollsters instead defended the democratic benefits of all kinds of surveys, whether of voters or consumers. In a speech promoting the value of market research, Roper claimed it "indisputable" that "those things . . . which the public have a really deep-seated desire to change are going to be changed, somewhat, sometime" via the information they communicated to surveyors. This was true even though the only instances of gathering data about "the people" that he went on to describe—individuals' attitudes toward meat eating, the telltale signs of the tardy bill-payer—were designed to help companies sustain higher profits or avoid risks (Roper, 1942b). These victories had little to do with the consumer speaking to power.

In the political arena, pollsters likewise ignored the possibility that politicians could make use of public opinion research to craft targeted messages for public consumption as much as to guide policymaking. Franklin D. Roosevelt, an early and avid convert to the polls, used them less to discover the public's views, for instance, than to shape them and gain support for actions he had already determined to carry out. As Richard Steele has described it, for FDR, "reports on public opinion were seen as 'intelligence'—that is, information on the goings on in that unknown territory, the American mind. They were the starting point of informational campaigns designed to furnish that mind." Furthermore, the administration's own pollsters, Hadley Cantril and Gerard Lambert (the man famous for the overwhelmingly successful Listerine advertising campaign), included in all their public opinion reports advice "on how the attitude reported might be corrected" (Steele, 1974, pp. 207, 215; see also Casey, 2001). This relationship between polls and the exercise of political power, paralleling that between advertising studies and corporate power, was a far cry from Gallup's rosy vision of opinion surveys as the "pulse of democracy."

The Human Problems of the Polls

When speaking in radio broadcasts or writing in newspaper columns, Gallup and Roper presented the "people's voice" as transparent and wholly unmediated by their method of calling it into being. Pollsters "discovered" average Americans' views, they said, by asking them. Of course, opinion researchers did more than that. Gallup's AIPO and Roper's *Fortune* Survey employed vast numbers of interviewers to carry out their questioning, a cast of thousands

spread across the country ready to be tapped for the quick turnaround necessary for timely poll results. Back at the home offices, polling organizations tested their questions for reliability and clarity, constructed representative samples, and analyzed interviewers' weekly reports that trickled in through the mail. The questions put to scattered, anonymous individuals were thus transformed, in the words of George Gallup, into a "week-by-week picture of what Americans are thinking" (1940a, p. 23).

But finding the public—or rather, the right cross-section of it—was a project shot through with difficulties. And it brought Gallup and Roper face-to-face with collisions between their democratic and scientific aims on the one hand and more practical and structural pressures on the other. In one way or another, pollsters' most intractable problems in crafting a science of opinion research had to do with their labor force in the field. As one supervisor of interviewers flatly put it:

> Every element in research can be reduced to scientific, absolute mathematical accuracy—everything excepting the field work, upon whose findings the entire structure depends. For such variable matters as tact, reliability, personal approach and care of the interviewer in the field are the first tools for the translation of opinion into statistics, and human motives into percentages. (Andrews, 1949–1950, p. 587)

If she exaggerated the straightforwardness of other aspects of pollsters' science, this writer did not overstate the human problems that impinged upon any attempts to standardize interviewing (see Crespi, 1948; Heneman & Paterson, 1949; Menefee, 1944; Sheatsley, 1947–1948, 1950–1951, 1951; Williams, 1942; Witt, 1949). Regulating a far-flung group of part-time staffers was a complex task, and not one pollsters were all that interested in addressing. Gallup, for example, trained his field staff by mail and had no supervising structure for his corps of interviewers, the ranks of which numbered approximately 1,100 by 1940. The pollster relied on their status as white-collar, well-educated men and women, recommended by the "leading persons" in their communities, to underwrite their competence in carrying out his surveys. Roper had a much smaller and better-trained staff but would be party to many of the same problems as was his competitor (Cantril & Research Associates, 1944, p. 83; Mosteller, Hyman, McCarthy, Marks, & Truman, 1949, p. 145).

Interviewers, despite their middle-class background, were low-paid, nonprofessional workers, and increasingly over the years, women. Theirs was a new and crucial kind of work. It was, after all, the sum total of thousands of their interactions with strangers that made pollsters and marketers' facts legitimate. Numerous opinion researchers, both on the commercial and political sides, therefore lamented the lack of standards in the interviewing business and made proposals for professionalizing the field in ways that would create a stable pool of well-trained interviewers. "With interviewers all over the country working for anybody who will send them a batch of questionnaires; working under a variety [*sic*] remuneration plans and not responsible in any real sense to anybody I can easily understand why in certain quarters research has lost much of its dignity," observed the director of the Market-Opinion Research Company in 1950, summarizing the difficulties. As did others, he floated the suggestion of an association of independent research agencies, but no workable organization ever emerged (R. W. Oudersluys to Roper, September 20, 1950, Roper Correspondence). Thus, the opinion business would be plagued by distrust of its own interviewers.

Essential links in the polling chain, interviewers could not themselves always be counted upon. Questioners could improperly reveal their own biases, guide the respondents too much, or simply bungle the job. When a respondent showed no understanding of the word "atheist," for example, a Gallup Poll interviewer was reported to have rephrased the question as: "Would

you vote for a sinner for President?" (Gallup Jr., 1969, p. 17). Less obvious problems, such as "cheating" interviewers, also plagued the polls. Cheaters were interviewers who, under time pressure to fill their quotas of respondents for all the necessary categories, filled in answers themselves or otherwise falsified data. As one field director put it, "[I]n a desperate attempt to keep up with assignments and please the supervisor, a person of limited ability will be forced to manufacture interviews." Others who had become "disgruntled over some fancied injustice," she noted, could take "recourse in short cuts which amounted to dishonest interviews" (Clarkson, 1950, p. 84). It is difficult to know whether Gallup and Roper's staffs would have been more reliable had they not been contract workers primarily interested in questionnaire responses as a source of income. But it is clear that all sorts of "scientific" opinion gathering were subject to this problem. A market researcher noted the tendency of some interviewers to make several legitimate visits to respondents and then "do the 'mind reading act' on subsequent calls; they believe they know what the replies will be and record them without asking the questions" (King, 1942). The number of articles in professional forums on cheaters and the possibility of building "check-ups" and "cheater traps" into polling procedures testifies to the significance of this concern (see, for instance, the discussion in Mosteller et al., 1949, pp. 141–142). The possibility of deception consumed a great deal of pollsters' energy. As Roper remarked in 1942, "[W]e have been aware of the problem for eight years and have spent a very considerable amount of money in trying to lick it" (Roper to R. King, October 16, 1942, Roper Correspondence).

Although pollsters expended much ink and worry on the subversion of the polls' integrity, acts of deliberate deceit were the least of their problems. Less evident and harder-to-correct flaws in the opinion-surveying enterprise stemmed from the way that pollsters composed and instructed their staffs. Especially in the first decade of scientific polling, interviewers had great discretion as to how they located their respondents. As Gallup explained it, his field staff was given written instructions to reach a certain number of respondents fitting different income, gender, and age categories. "The interviewer is not given the names of any persons to poll; he is merely given the types," he noted, and "it is up to him to find the individuals in his local community to fit the types" (1940b, p. 14). According to early 1940s polling practice, this made for a carefully considered sample, since the "types" were set in advance, and the interviewers each fashioned a kind of capsule cross-section of their own. This means of acquiring a sample fit the decentralized nature of the opinion business quite well.

But tracking down respondents to fit Gallup and Roper's categories presented considerable challenges. As direct questions about income were seen as too sensitive, for instance, interviewers were asked to estimate their respondents' class positions, based on criteria such as their neighborhood, house, dress, and material possessions such as refrigerators. It was for this reason that both Roper and Gallup preferred interviews to take place in the home rather than on the street, since a glance around the domestic interior allowed a better assessment of the respondent's financial status (Cantril & Research Associates, 1944, pp. 98–106; "Interview with George Gallup," 1952, p. 64; Spingarn, 1938, p. 101).[7] Interviewers would often eschew asking the respondent's precise age as well—assuming that women in particular might be offended by the question and, in any event, were likely to dissemble.

Estimating the income and age of respondents was only the most obvious way in which high levels of discretion and subjectivity entered into the making of the polls. The question of "rapport" across class and racial lines constituted an even more fundamental difficulty for

7. Pollsters later modified this approach by having respondents look at a card listing a range of income brackets and then indicate the category in which they fit.

pollsters like Roper and Gallup, going as it did to the heart of their project to find and make audible the public. Some members of the public, it turned out, were difficult to access—or made middle-class interviewers uncomfortable. Multiple social scientific studies of opinion surveying as early as the 1940s documented the tendency of the interviewer's social class to affect not just the selection of those to be interviewed but the responses he or she garnered. Polls' consistent slant toward the white-collar and Republican, for example, was known to result "in large part from the reluctance of middle-class interviewers to approach the lowest income groups, who are most likely to be inarticulate and suspicious." Further evidence indicated that "the greater the difference between the status of the interviewer and the respondent, the more likely is he [the respondent] not to report his true opinions" (Cantril & Research Associates, 1944, pp. 146, 177; see also Gosnell & de Grazia, 1942). In 1942, for example, social psychologist Daniel Katz found that white-collar interviewers and working-class interviewers operating under the same instructions received markedly different answers from working people on issues having to do with both labor and the war. He concluded that "one source of the constant bias of the public opinion polls in underpredicting the Democratic vote lies in their exclusive reliance upon white-collar interviewers who fail to discover the true opinions of the labor voter" (Katz, 1942, p. 268).

Pollsters did make some efforts to correct for such distortions, but before 1948 they were minimal and sporadic—perhaps indicating that social scientific critique alone was not enough to prompt a change in practice if the criticism did not at the same time disrupt their financial base. In the early 1940s, for example, Archibald Crossley had African Americans on his staff interview Southern blacks, but in the North, "white interviewers generally picked up the Negro cases." Roper and Gallup both employed a few African American interviewers but had whites do the majority of their interviewing of respondents of all racial backgrounds (Mosteller et al., 1949, pp. 134–135). The pollsters tended to have even greater class than racial biases in the makeup of their staffs, reasoning that less-educated individuals were unable "to understand and do the difficult work" they required (D. J. Robinson, 1999, p. 56). Despite recommendations from fellow social scientists to hire "special supplementary interviewers" as well as "regular" white middle-class ones so as not to introduce biases in their results, pollsters knowingly risked such misrepresentation (Cantril & Research Associates, 1944, p. 118). This would, of course, have implications for what mainstream public opinion looked like in their polls.

Thus, despite contemporary studies that illuminated the profound and vexing problem of rapport, measures to remedy it were never undertaken in a serious fashion. What one might consider the primary quest of the polls—reaching and revealing the opinions of a diverse population—was subordinated to time and cost efficiency. And yet practical matters were not the only barrier to pollsters' quest for a representative public opinion. Other rationales, deeply embedded in surveyors' creation of the "miniature electorate," or cross-sample, similarly worked to confound this aim.

The "Miniature Electorate"

Pollsters' ties to business rerouted their practice in significant ways. Perhaps the best example of this was opinion researchers' strong emphasis on election forecasting. Both Roper and Gallup believed the social benefits of the election poll to be insignificant. Gallup claimed in 1949 that "the only useful purpose served by election forecasting is to provide a check on polling methods and techniques," and six years later noted that "election forecasting is the least useful of all the many projects which we carry on" (Gallup, 1949a, 1955). Roper regularly wondered if pollsters should get out of the forecasting business altogether. As he wrote

to a friend, "I think the prediction of elections is a socially useless function" (Roper to J. N. Darling, November 6, 1944, Roper Correspondence).

But both pollsters well understood its instrumental value. The focus on elections was a product of pollsters' own emphasis on elections as public tests, beginning in 1936. It was also rooted in sponsoring newspapers' interest in political horse races and corporate clients' desires for a check on polling methods. Wanting to be sure that they were paying for good information about the consumer market but having no solid measures of that information's reliability, corporations took electoral projections as a proxy for their other investments. Publicity from Gallup's electoral polls, Susan Ohmer has found, "enhanced his reputation in Hollywood," where he had many clients, since "executives using film research believed it gave them a similar ability to predict public opinion" (Ohmer, 1991, p. 4). Accurate election results seemingly "proved" the effectiveness of opinion polling more generally, and pollsters could profit financially from a correct forecast, since corporate customers viewed elections as a litmus test of their sampling methods.

For the same reason, of course, election forecasts were a precarious business, since they opened up pollsters' social scientific methods to an unusual degree of public scrutiny. Because market and political research so overlapped in personnel and methodology, pollsters knew that poor political projections could always mean the loss of valuable accounts. Although dependant on election forecasts, pollsters realized that this fact put them in a difficult bind. Roper voiced in 1944 their warring desires. On the one hand, pollsters wanted to make "blunt straightforward unequivocal prediction[s]"; on the other, they wanted "to protect from harm this infant science of marketing and public opinion research which is accurate enough for so many socially useful functions but could be inaccurate in predicting elections." He hoped that if pollsters were wrong in the upcoming election, newspaper editors and others would not "discredit a tool—marketing research—which can be of tremendous value, not only to industry, but to our American democracy" (Roper to J. N. Darling, November 6, 1944, Roper Correspondence).

But inevitably, the pollsters' use of elections to procure other business encouraged their clients to draw lessons from their forecasts. From 1936 onward, concerns about the accuracy of the public polls migrated into the domain of private market research. Knowing that public relations and scientific claims were tightly locked together, Roper was compelled in 1952 to send out a letter explaining two misconceptions in the press about his pre-election statistics to a handful of social scientists but also a long list of corporate clients—Ford Motor Company, Hormel & Co., Dole Hawaiian Pineapple Company, Marshall Field, and others (the identical letter was sent out to each; see Roper to B. Donaldson of Ford Motor Company, November 12, 1952, Roper Correspondence). He did not persuade them all. The publisher of *Good Housekeeping* wrote to the pollster in 1952, "I think you already know that the general consensus about all of you is that you missed the boat in '52 as you did in '48. Personally, I felt this year as I did in '48 when I think I told you the whole business was very dangerous waters for you fellows to be in" (J. R. Buckley to Roper, December 10, 1952, Roper Correspondence).

Such anxious correspondence testifies to what was at stake financially in electoral polls for opinion surveyors and corporations alike. These surveys were arguably the least democratic ones that Gallup and Roper undertook, not only because of the "bandwagon effect"—that is, the social influence thought to stem from knowing how others might vote, documented by some contemporary social scientists (see Campbell, 1951)—but also because the act of going to the physical polls *already* measured voters' preferences. Surveyors deposited their own hopes for a democratic science in the social issue polls. Attitudes about public policy, unlike those about

candidates, had no sure channel to decision makers, and it was here that the opinion surveys might have encouraged more robust and informed public debates. Nevertheless, researchers diverted much more money and energy into presidential contests than social issue surveys. And not surprisingly given the incentive structure in place, the latter, unverifiable by ballots, were considerably less rigorous in construction. Electoral polls were based on much larger samples and subject to more careful cross-checking than were the hundreds of polls on topics from foreign policy to family life (Hogan, 1997, pp. 167–168; Wheeler, 1976, p. 28).

As Daniel Robinson has demonstrated, this intense focus on electoral polling—the gold standard for corporate clients—introduced further distortions into the profession writ large. This was because the cross-sample for an election, what George Gallup called the "miniature electorate," was composed solely of those, in the pollster's opinion, who were likely to vote. The polity that Gallup in particular sampled thus drew a peculiar picture of the adult "general public."[8] The early surveys of the most prominent of the pollsters systematically underrepresented women, African Americans, and individuals at the bottom of the economic ladder—those groups who were hard to get to, seemed unlikely to vote, or did not fit his image of a rational citizenry. Despite Gallup's democratic rhetoric, this deliberate policy resulted in figures that are difficult in any sense to call "representative." In 21 of his surveys taken in 1936 and 1937, for example, women comprised only 34 percent of the sample. African Americans, although approximately 10 percent of the population in the 1930 and 1940 censuses, made up a slim 1.9 percent of respondents. Robinson's comparisons of census data and the AIPO sample further show that professionals and semiprofessionals were interviewed far out of proportion to their numbers in the population (1999, pp. 51, 54, 56–57).

As these numbers suggest, because the general public and the predicted electorate were not one and the same, Gallup and Roper did not attempt to construct demographically accurate samples of the population. Instead, they keyed their sampling design to commonsense notions about responsible and reflective citizens. In practice, this meant that they measured an America more male, white, and affluent than the actual population (see Gidlow, 2004). Pollsters carried into their craft a good deal of conventional wisdom about the kind of individual who voted. First among these precepts was that "people in the lower income levels are usually not as much interested in issues as people in the upper levels and therefore are inclined to take less interest in voting" ("Interview with George Gallup," 1952, p. 56). Equally important was the orthodoxy that "women on the whole are less well-informed than men," and that housewives in particular voted infrequently (London, 1940, p. 15; see also Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 271). As Roper put it in one of his broadcasts, it wasn't that women didn't express their opinions. They were simply "more interested in such practical matters as how to bring up their children . . . or perhaps at times, what Mrs. Jones wore last Friday to tea." Men, by contrast, were "more inclined to take upon themselves the solution of the weightier affairs of state" (Roper, June 11, 1950, CBS Broadcasts).

In an explanation of how to predict elections, Roper revealed some of the other judgment calls he and his colleagues made regarding which segments of the public were more or less likely to vote. Some of the groups in the latter category were too "obvious" to merit discussion: those under 21 years of age, those in mental hospitals, and, tellingly, African Americans in large parts of the South (Roper, January 2, 1949, CBS Broadcasts). Trying to replicate the voting public and knowing that many blacks were barred from the polls, surveyors deliberately undersampled African Americans and sometimes the non-English speaking—also as-

8. Roper's *Fortune* Survey regularly sampled the entire adult population, whereas the AIPO polls, with certain exceptions, included only the voting population. Gallup noted that "except on questions involving social issues, non-voting groups in the South and elsewhere are excluded" (1944, p. 101).

suming they would not vote (Mosteller et al., 1949, pp. 81, 90, 162). Clearly, in order to get an accurate reading of what "the people" wanted, it was necessary to downplay some of those people's numbers. As Robinson notes, suppressing the proportions of working-class, female, and black Americans in their samples was highly ironic given the pollsters' talk of making the "inarticulate masses" audible (D. J. Robinson, 1999). Following the imperatives of the accurate election poll rather than their own democratic talk of discovering the people's views, surveyors deliberately made their new science *less* representative.

Gallup and Roper's readings of the citizenry could and did undermine the science of election calling. Indeed, this was a major reason for their crisis of 1948, when all the major pollsters erroneously projected that Thomas Dewey would capture the presidency from Harry Truman. Simply put, varied segments of the public did not behave in the characteristic ways surveyors expected them to. One case in point was the working-class vote, which the pollsters sharply underestimated. As Roper put it, the "large turn-out of the labor vote" in that election "upset the statistical allowance we normally make for the labor vote in our sample" (Roper, November 7, 1948, CBS Broadcasts). Pollsters' surprise at workers' voting levels, boosting the Democratic percentages, was a leading explanation for their inaccurate forecast. Significantly, surveyors made this out to be less their mistake about conceptions of laborers than a dramatic and unexpected shift in workers' exercise of their political rights. "One of the most important single things this past election taught us is that working people have learned the importance of exercising their franchise," proclaimed Roper in a kind of democratic object lesson. He implied that the pollsters could hardly be faulted for their miscalculation, since "there was no pat formula which anybody had to precisely measure the impact of this newfound awareness of citizenship responsibilities on the part of working people" (Roper, January 2, 1949, CBS Broadcasts).

African Americans also came out to vote in larger-than-usual numbers in 1948, motivated in part by Truman's civil rights plank. This defiance of accepted patterns similarly unsettled the pollsters, who had in the past worked with assumptions about the stable and predictable levels of interest in politics by different social groups. Women further derailed pollsters' expectations. Explaining why surveyors had misjudged the undecided vote in 1948, Gallup noted that he and his colleagues had been taken aback by the relatively high participation of "women in the low income and education groups." These were individuals, he observed, who "normally show the least interest in elections." His explanation, hardly squaring with his democratic rhetoric, was that "if pressure is put on them on Election Day by labor unions, the Church, and party machines . . . they do vote" (Gallup, 1949c).

It is not surprising that there were links between pollsters' political prejudices and their projections. What is more surprising, given the stakes—not only professional but also financial—is that Gallup and Roper found it so difficult to overcome certain rather unscientific assumptions they held about the public they surveyed. The possibility of error that their skewed representations produced reveals that "scientific" opinion research was entangled with an imagined mainstream America that was white, educated, and male. As such, neither commercial surveying nor electoral polls, based as they were on those supposedly most likely to buy or to vote, acted as a "tool for democracy" for the poor, disenfranchised, or socially marginal. Pollsters' overriding focus on elections endangered their scientific and commercial reputations. Yet, the same focus on elections would finally spur major reforms in polling methods.

Sampling under Scrutiny

Ultimately, it was Gallup and Roper's public failure of 1948, rather than scientific studies of the polls' flaws or surveyors' own recognition of the oversights in their sampling meth-

ods, that would bring the greatest scrutiny to pollsters' practice. When Harry Truman upset the confident predictions of all the key pollsters, their clients immediately took notice. A study of 1,100 leading American business executives found that most were "shocked by the failure of the polls to predict correctly the election" (Whitehead & Partners, 1949). The president of the A. C. Nielsen Company wrote to Roper just after the 1948 election that his organization had been "deluged with inquiries of a type which forced us to the conclusion that it would be necessary to issue . . . [a] press release entitled, 'Election Polls and Marketing Research'" (A. Nielsen to Roper, November 5, 1948, Roper Correspondence). The same miscalculation resulted in the cancellation of several of Gallup's corporate contracts, including that with the Walt Disney Company (Ohmer, 1991, p. 22). Researchers concerned about the public stature of social science also responded promptly (Cahalan, 1949; Meier & Saunders, 1949; Merton & Hatt, 1949; Moss, 1949; Sheatsley, 1948–1949). The Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) Committee on Analysis of Pre-election Polls and Forecasts was appointed just eight days after the election, with funds from the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations. It immediately stepped in to perform a thorough investigation of the national polls, reasoning that "quick action" was necessary since "extended controversy regarding the pre-election polls among lay and professional groups might have extensive and unjustified repercussions upon all types of opinion and attitude studies and perhaps upon social science research generally" (Mosteller et al., 1949, pp. vii–viii).

The SSRC's final report on the polls of 1948 devoted 391 pages of analysis to the myriad scientific and human problems built into the new technology. From errors in punching and tabulating to the subtle influences of interviewers' class status and political opinions upon the answers they received, the reliability of the polls as a window onto public opinion was challenged at every turn. The Committee concluded that there were eight major steps pollsters took in making predictions, "at each of which error may enter," and that "there is no reason to believe that errors in magnitude such as those occurring in 1948 are unlikely to occur in future elections" (Mosteller et al., 1949, pp. 290, 80).

Under the watchful eyes of the SSRC, other social scientists, and their corporate clients, pollsters in 1949 began to experiment with probability rather than quota sampling, which up until then had been their standard method. The goal of probability sampling, which randomized the selection of respondents, was to make opinion polling one notch more scientific, excising subjectivity and chance from the interviewer's job. Taking the decision of whom to poll out of the interviewer's hands, while certainly more "objective," presented new and formidable problems, however. This much Elmo Roper knew from experiments in probability sampling in New York City (Roper, 1949a). Interviewers were instructed, simply enough, to sample every so many residents in designated city blocks and housing units. Their difficulty fulfilling this basic requirement was telling of the whole host of obstacles that stood in the way of reaching "the public."

One of Roper's interviewers, Elizabeth Wagner, began her report of her "statistical adventures" in probability sampling by noting, "I started out with an open mind, sincerely interested in this new method of selecting a cross section." Soon enough, however, she encountered all sorts of barriers, such as finding no one at home in the specified buildings, apartments that had no mailboxes or doorbells by which to count off and select units, apartment buildings with a locked front door, multiple-occupancy dwellings crowded with several heads of household, and doormen in upper-income (or, in pollster lingo, "A and B") buildings who ejected the hopeful interviewer from the building "like a Third Avenue drunk."

However, "much worse was to follow" once Wagner got to Harlem, where the housing stock was in such disarray that the counting system Roper had devised was close to useless.

"Needless to say, there were no lists of tenants or individual doorbells," she wrote, so that "one side of a block occupied me for most of a very frustrating afternoon." Beyond this, however, Wagner encountered distrust and resistance from many of the people in the neighborhood whom she was able to track down. She enclosed with her write-up a "notice of a protest meeting in Harlem which may or may not explain the suspicion with which I was received, the unwillingness of the tenants to give me information as to neighbors' hours or habits, in some cases even the refusal to answer my questions." Wagner suspected that she was seen by landlords and tenants alike as a "checker-upper" or bill collector, if not a social worker. She reported that one "colored woman" in particular was terrified by her visit. Wagner noted that the woman was "convinced that the F.B.I. was after her and informed me that her concern over the inquiries I had made was responsible for a nervous condition that had kept her from her job that day." Not surprisingly, this same respondent was reported to be hostile during the interview.

Wagner concluded by chronicling all the "deviations from the stated rules necessitated by non-conformance of New York landlords and building operators with our survey requirements." In sum, she humorously wrote:

> So the interviewer clutching her well-thumbed book of rules . . . climbs up and down stairs, arrives at the lucky (?) number to be greeted never or hardly ever by the duly elected respondent. To the left, the mister or missus is loudly at home, to the right, likewise. With all the allowances that must be made by the various building arrangements just enumerated, with the many compromises she has been forced to make to arrive anywhere at long last, who is to judge her and point a finger if she relaxes a bit at this point and says "what the hell, I'll turn to the left! I've got to fill this quota in time for my Christmas check!"

"Frankly," the interviewer stated, "this kind of an experience is one I should not care to repeat" (Wagner, 1949).

Another of Roper's interviewers, Mary Crawford, corroborated these tales, noting that exceptions to the rules she was supposed to follow in choosing respondents "cropped up at almost every turn," again even in simply attempting to systematically count residences. All of the practical challenges of the pollsters' craft were brought into sharp relief by the new method of probability sampling. Having set out to find respondents in a "Negro section," Crawford first pointed to "the question of it being safe or wise to work" in certain areas "at night or even late in the afternoon. . . . Some interviewers might have run into serious trouble if they weren't able to cope with a situation quickly and tactfully." (This risk, one imagines, would have been avoided in a system of discretionary interviewing.) Crawford also confirmed the methodological problem of rapport, believing that it was "particularly bad for a white interviewer to work on this part of the job. . . . You are automatically looked upon with suspicion when you ask any questions about numbers of people, etc. I also had the feeling that even when you do finally get your interview you are not getting the most honest answers possible." Crawford noted that she had gleaned this same reaction when working in other low-income areas.

The problems of accurate interviewing, Crawford added, were compounded by the difficulty of a (presumably) white middle-class woman assessing the views and economic status of respondents so different from herself. She recounted the problematic experiences she had interviewing in a Puerto Rican neighborhood because of the language barrier: "While I did manage to take most of the respondents through a complete interview—by hook or by crook—I most certainly had the feeling that they didn't know what I was talking about most of the time." Furthermore, she doubted that she was able to pinpoint the social status of her respondents with any degree of accuracy across a stark racial and class divide. The grim liv-

ing conditions she encountered, for example, led her to designate a person "who might normally be classified as C in any other area" as a "D," or lower status. Recognizing the gulf between herself and her respondents, Crawford understood that "the public" was being filtered through not neutral, but middle-class eyes. In other words, an unrepresentative field staff could not help but skew the picture it produced of the general population. The interviewer closed by saying that attempting to locate respondents according to probability sampling was a wasteful and tiresome task, full of "unpleasantness and difficulties" (Crawford, 1949).

Roper and his staff agreed. Pollsters, they believed, could not count on this sort of intrepid dedication from their interviewers, most of whom Roper suspected would descend into cheating if forced to undergo such travails. The technique, he acknowledged in a rueful memo to his staff, relied for its scientific merits on "the assumption that human beings (interviewers) will cease to act like human beings when ordered to do so by a statistician in an ivory tower." In light of these discouraging reports from the field, Roper asked his staff: "Can the kind of interviewers we or anyone else has available to us do a probability sample—particularly in the slum areas of big cities—if they want to?" and "Even assuming they can—will they?" He went on to say, "[I]f there does exist the choice—of allowing the interviewers some leeway in the selection of respondents or creating an interviewing staff composed largely or even partially of dishonest people, the interests of science would best be served by going the former road." Knowing what he did about selection bias and rapport, Roper's preference signaled a retreat from the goal of polling a representative public. He went on to dismiss probability sampling as something that "seems to have momentary acceptance on the part of theoreticians" (Roper, 1949a). The pollster surely hoped that once out of the glare of the 1948 election and the SSRC inquiry, his staff could return to business as usual.

These episodes attest that even if random sampling got opinion surveyors "closer" to a variegated population, they did not necessarily consider that object worth their time or expense. Some segments of the public did not merit the trouble that was required to track them down. As such, pollsters preferred to work with more easily reached samples and a less representative but infinitely more practical public. When not under the pressure of election forecasts—again, the most carefully designed and implemented kinds of polls—it seems certain that polling agencies would be tempted to relax their methodological stringency. This is especially likely given the fact that their clients' doubts about the legitimacy of public opinion research after the electoral miscall waned quickly. "Within six months," noted one observer, "market research agencies as well as public opinion polls were functioning at their 1948 levels" (Parten, 1950, p. 3). Roper wrote with great relief to a correspondent: "I'm finding that apparently [the Truman forecast] didn't do any really substantial harm except the harm that comes to anybody who slips on a banana peel in public! Our interviewers are finding no trouble interviewing, the last employee attitude survey went off as well as they ever had before the election, and we've lost no clients" (Roper to G. Engelhard, March 16, 1949, Roper Correspondence). Indeed, he later reported that market research work had doubled between 1948 and 1956 (Roper to L. Moore, November 16, 1956, Roper Correspondence).

Creating the Corporate Public

In attempting to reach a more representative public via probability sampling, surveyors had only become more aware of its elusiveness. This is something they had long known, evident even in the trouble their interviewers had in establishing a rapport with those they hoped to question. Surveyors were also, on a day-to-day basis, engaged in segmenting the U.S. population by class, race, age, and region, among other categories. All of this might have

prompted them to highlight in their polls the conflicts within the public they measured. Yet, for all their skill at fragmenting the populace in order to produce the miniature electorate, pollsters in most venues were not all that interested in exploring the rifts that divided these sub-publics.

In some ways more influential than their characterizations of any one social group or segment of the population were pollsters' invocations of public opinion itself. Pollsters frequently spoke and wrote about Americans in singular terms, as a homogeneous and united bloc. The language they employed was revealing. George Gallup could ask in 1939, for example: "Where is the American public headed in 1939? What will it be saying and thinking?" (Gallup, 1939, p. 27). "Where the People Stand," Roper's radio show, was billed as making clear "the people's viewpoint" on issues from presidential popularity to "major league pennant races" (Announcer, February 15, 1948, CBS Broadcasts). Statements such as "the public is rapidly developing a frame of mind which will tolerate no interference with the defense production program" and "the average American takes the attitude that conscription is . . . necessary to build up our defenses" were commonplace in pollsters' explanations of their results (Gallup, 1941a, p. 12). In a single feature article in 1941, Gallup invoked the "average American" or "average man" 10 times (Gallup, 1941b). Roper similarly claimed that the subject of his NBC broadcasts was to find out "what makes the average American tick" (Roper, February 17, 1952, NBC Broadcasts). The news media were quick to take up these tropes, with *Newsweek* writing in its report on public opinion in 1947 of "the shadowy figure beginning to emerge" from the polls, whom they labeled the "American Majority Man" ("American Majority Man," 1947, pp. 32–33). Pollsters in this fashion made of diverse individuals a collective "we," or a "mass subject" (see Warner, 1993). Pollsters' aggregate portrait of the public was always more coherent than their own cross-sections told them it was.

Certainly, surveyors pointed out in some instances, as they had in 1936, social fissures in the electorate (Gallup, 1938, p. 139). Yet they more often tended to bestow public opinion with a unitary voice, describing their findings not as how Americans articulated their varied views but as how "America speaks," the catchphrase of the Gallup Poll. Columbia University sociologist Robert Lynd caught on to this feature of the polls early on, writing in 1941 to Roper that "the bald fact is that class lines are hardening in American life, whether we Americans like it or not." But the *Fortune* Survey, he charged, "screams aloud to its readers over and over again that class is a myth in American life" (R. Lynd to Roper, April 5, 1941, Roper Correspondence). Gallup and Roper's experiences in promoting wartime morale, which called for a united national front, and the cold war that followed provide part of the explanation for their relentlessly unitary portraits of the American public. As Michael Hogan has noted, Gallup, who regularly praised the wisdom of the common man, was hostile to "public opinion" on one topic alone: he did not believe that citizens sufficiently appreciated the threat of Communism to the American way of life (Hogan, 1997).

Even more critically, syndicated pollsters' links to corporations and advertisers, who were eager to play down social conflicts in an age of labor and racial unrest, colored their reportage. Regularly sought out as speakers by business audiences, Gallup and Roper constantly reassured them that "the public" believed in free enterprise and was loyal to corporate America (see, for example, Roper, 1949b). Perhaps not surprisingly given the corporate underpinning of their profession, pro-business attitudes also crept into the construction of the polls. Industrial psychologist Arthur Kornhauser, scrutinizing seven pollsters' questions over six years (1940–1945), documented what he believed to be a consistent antilabor bias. He announced that "the simple outstanding fact is that the poll questions concentrate heavily on

negative and vulnerable aspects of organized labor" rather than their accomplishments for working people (Kornhauser, 1946–1947, p. 485).[9] The long reach of pollsters' sponsors affected what questions were asked in weekly surveys; it also meant that some issues were off the table altogether. The fact that Gallup's polls depended on client newspapers, many of them based in the South, is the likely reason that some politically divisive topics, notably race relations, were rarely addressed in his early surveys (D. J. Robinson, 1999, p. 54). Kathy Newman's research on radio programming in this era reveals that racial inequality was not the only taboo subject for media outlets: NBC's internal code in the 1930s and 1940s prohibited explicit mention of "labor and/or labor controversies" (Newman, 2004, p. 109).

The very way that pollsters presented their findings kept out of view most divisions and disagreements in American society that were not the product of ephemeral debates on the "issues." The very use of majorities and minorities, pollsters' central categories, stabilized the public into two internally undifferentiated masses. This form disallowed some kinds of facts from coming forth, certain correlations being too messy to show in standardized formats. One of the more reflective of Roper's colleagues at CBS, a news editor, expressed doubts about the simple ways pollsters relayed their findings. Responding to a particular broadcast on interfaith marriage, he noted that "no attempt was made to relate the statistics of answers to the statistics of population." This meant that a certain fraction of Americans were said to favor intermarriage, but there was no way of discerning from which religious groups these people came, not to mention which groups they favored, or didn't favor, intermarrying with. "I wonder whether there is much significance to overall figures that are unrelated to the particular group to which the person answering the question belongs," he wrote, adding, "it would almost appear, when listening to your broadcast, as if you only polled Protestant Americans" (H. Cassirer to Roper, February 27, 1949, Roper Correspondence). This colleague of Roper's pressed the pollster for more rather than less segmenting of public opinion, believing this would present a more realistic accounting of the issue.

The commercial structure of the polling field worked against such analyses, however. Publishers and studios limited the formats the surveyors could use to communicate their information, requiring them to encapsulate often complicated findings in straightforward statistics. The easily summarized chart in the newspaper or the 15-minute radio broadcast on what Americans thought about Communism did not lend themselves to complex analyses. Here, advertisers and perceived audiences—themselves determined through market research—were key factors in determining the kind of knowledge opinion researchers could convey. As Roper's son would write to a party interested in syndicating his father's polls, "our general experience has been that newspapers basically are not very interested in research. They want frequent and exciting horse-race figures that are hot off the wire. They are not particularly interested in a relatively sober analysis of the political situation, but rather in headlines—the 'who's ahead today' kind of thing" (B. Roper to G. Adcox, August 27, 1959, Roper Correspondence).

Elmo Roper railed against this tendency, bewailing the fact that his editors at the *Herald Tribune* had "gradually deleted the little 'how to read these tables' hints" he had initially included with his polls, for instance (Roper to S. R. Davis, October 15, 1952, Roper

9. Kornhauser examined seven polling organizations, but his findings were particularly true of the AIPO. He discovered heavy bias in the way questions were worded (of 155 questions, only four had a prolabor bias, 80–90 were slanted antilabor, and the remainder were balanced) and the ways results were interpreted. See the replies to Kornhauser in a subsequent issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Link and Freiberg; Platten Jr.; and Clark (1947).

Correspondence). He complained to a fellow pollster on another occasion about *Fortune*'s inclusion of survey data he had asked to be deleted that made his figures less accurate but perhaps more interesting: "I lost my argument and the figures were published" (Roper to H. Link, September 29, 1941, Roper Correspondence). Indeed, pollsters were wary of the media's ability to streamline opinion even more radically than did their own techniques, exaggerating a single finding or distorting the meaning of their percentages.[10] On one occasion, for example, Roper lodged a complaint with *Fortune* magazine, noting that to his surprise, one of his key findings in a survey about anti-Semitism had been "buried in a footnote" (Roper to A. Furth, January 2, 1946, Roper Correspondence).

In a sense, those in the business of opinion research were victims of their own success. Newspapers could claim, through marketing research, that readers wanted clearer and more definitive findings than polls had actually turned up. The manager of the National Newspaper Syndicate, for example, indicated to Roper one of the member paper's desires for "more 'facts' even in tabular form." He explained that the newspaper in question claimed to "want 'specific data the readers can cite in conversations'" in order to compete with "opposition papers" who ran polls by Gallup and the popular Samuel Lubell (R. C. Dille to Roper, September 14, 1956, Roper Correspondence). Willing to sacrifice depth of research or presentation for sales, on another occasion a spokesman for the Newspaper Syndicate noted: "Quite often the name of Samuel Lubell will be offered by editors as the 'type' of approach they feel their readers can best appreciate. I realize that the service Lubell provides is nowhere near the complete picture offered by Roper; yet it becomes increasingly important that we find a way to offset this" (M. Brickman to E. Hodgins, September 25, 1958, Roper Correspondence).

Roper periodically worried about his radio show's Hooper ratings as well as cancellations of his weekly column by subscribing newspapers that cited lack of reader interest. Showing a distinct lack of trust in opinion-surveying techniques when it suited him, Roper wrote to one of the advisers to his radio show after hearing that his rating had fallen from 2.7 to 1.6. "I have a great respect for Hooper, and what I'm about to say is in no sense derogatory," noted the pollster, "but I doubt if he measures closer than four-tenths of 1 per cent, and my guess is that the actual rating was around 2 and still is. But for those who credit the instrument with more delicacy, we are faced with a drop from 2.7 to 1.6" (Roper to L. Cowan, May 11, 1948, Roper Correspondence). Surveyors couldn't always thumb their nose at the technology they in other venues so vigorously defended, however. In a letter to a newspaper editor who had cancelled his column, Roper wrote, "[S]o long as your decision was taken solely on the grounds of probable reader interest, I can find little to argue over" (Roper to the Editor, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 24, 1948, Roper Correspondence). Scientific surveys could be a double-edged sword for their inventors.

But the differing priorities of pollsters and their patrons surfaced most clearly when the former attempted to take on controversial topics in their surveys. Roper was more eager than was Gallup to take on fractious issues, especially his pet cause, antiminority sentiment in the

10. There were many other instances of the pollsters correcting "misconceptions" about opinion surveys as reported in the media. Roper sent a long letter to a writer for *Printer's Ink* sharing his gripe about the media's treatment of his polls for the 1952 election. "One newspaper out of fifty-five took our final published figures, put them in a box on the front page, stated that Mr. Roper 'very properly' took the position that there was no scientific basis for absolute prediction, but that they, the editors, were making their interpretation, which was that it was an Eisenhower landslide." Most of the rest of the media, however, "turned on the pollsters, lumped us all together, and said in effect, 'You failed to predict a landslide.'" Roper asked, "What might be done to convince editors that this is a socially useful tool even if used only for analysis and not for prediction? Or do those of us who believe that simply have to retire from the field or always run the risk of being misinterpreted?" (Roper to R. A. Baker, November 26, 1952, Roper Correspondence).

United States. In multiple polls and broadcasts in the 1940s, Roper brought this subject to public notice (Roper, 1946; Roper, September 11 and 18, 1949, CBS Broadcasts). When pondering whether to run them, however, he wondered "whether or not I'm getting into too much dynamite" (Roper to G. Parsons, January 19, 1945, Roper Correspondence). Roper was right to worry. An executive at the *Louisville Times* objected to the pollster's series on antiminority sentiment for just this reason, writing, "[T]he newspaper reader is habituated to spot news and frothy features. He doesn't expect to get, outside the editorial page, any serious discussion of the type which you've been giving him. He doesn't quite know what to do about it when he does" (M. Ethridge to Roper, March 7, 1945, Roper Correspondence). Roper could not simply dismiss such critiques. He always had to worry about the financial ramifications of newspaper clients' unhappiness, given that Gallup's column competed with, and outpaced his, at times by a 10:1 ratio (Hodgins, 1957).

Roper often noted that his heaviest mail was in response to broadcasts or articles on anti-Semitism and civil rights (Roper to G. Cornish, February 2, 1945; Roper to M. Ethridge, March 14, 1945; Roper to G. Cowles, May 23, 1945; Roper to F. Stanton, August 9, 1949; all in Roper Correspondence). Given such intense interest—that these were the issues that got "the public" engaged and talking—it may even have been the case that directly tackling such problems might have been profitable for publishing and radio corporations. This, however, was not a possibility that these establishments, worried above all about controversy, contemplated. Roper was therefore careful to assure the companies for whom he worked that his shows and columns were uncontentious and that he dealt in "hot" topics only occasionally (Roper to J. McConnell, December 13, 1951, Roper Correspondence). NBC's promotion of Roper's radio show to advertisers assured potential clients that the pollster's "non-partisan, factual" research methods guaranteed that his program would "avoid the partisanship that all too often means disgruntled customers." It added, "[W]hether you're of the Hard Sell or institutional school of advertising, you'll find that the Elmo Roper Program is right for your messages" (National Broadcasting Company, n.d.). How far out on a limb pollsters could go for their science or the democratic potential of their craft was always calibrated by their business interests.

Conclusion

Gallup and Roper's entire careers were spent discovering what the people wanted. By making "the public" their audience and target, the pollsters brushed over disharmonies and competing or opposed interests. By 1955, even Roper had come to the conclusion that too much attention had been given to majority opinion, saying, "I have become convinced that one of the things which is going to place the researcher at a considerable advantage in the years to come is an ability to recognize what I call 'the significant minorities'" (Roper, 1955). Here again, it was less social scientific accuracy or democratic concern that led the way than the desire on the part of many corporations—and politicians—to create new niche markets.[11] Segment marketing and fine-grained polls that took social, class, and gender identities into account would be the wave of the not-so-distant future (Buzzard, 1990; Cohen, 2003, pp. 292–344). Ironically enough, the financial sponsors of pollsters' facts and figures had always demanded much finer segmentation of the population in their market surveys than they had in the published polls. As Roper noted early on, the classification of economic levels he used

11. Brian Balogh (2003) has argued that politicians, taking their lead from marketers, were experimenting with targeted campaigning as early as the 1928 presidential election. This practice would only intensify over the course of the twentieth century.

in his *Fortune* Survey of social and political issues "often does not meet the requirements of other market research studies" (Roper to D. Hobart, May 18, 1942, Roper Correspondence).

Yet surveyors for most of the early scientific polling era imagined a unitary America, and made claims on behalf of a scientifically derived "public." That public was measured by a staff not at all characteristic of the "miniature electorate," not to mention the actual population of the nation. Pollsters' charts and percentages likewise dampened the voices of many groups in the society at large, including those who might have benefited most from a representative science of opinion. The poll results that Americans read in their newspapers or heard on the air in significant ways distorted what the "actual" public likely wanted and thought. Nevertheless, Gallup and Roper infused their commentary about survey data with rhetoric about the "democratic" choices both market surveys and political polls permitted.

As this essay has argued, the ties between social and political attitude research and profitability ensured that the polling profession could not bear out its democratic *or* scientific claims. This is not to say, of course, that commercial constraints were the only factor at work in the making of the midcentury polls and public. Nor is it to say that in the absence of such constraints the polling profession would (or could) have represented the U.S. population fully. But pollsters' investments in election races and syndicated support, and, in turn, corporate America's investment in the polls, meant that surveyors' sights were narrowed from the beginning. In the end, Gallup and Roper produced a social scientific instrument less accurate and useful than they initially had hoped. What pollsters created instead in their pioneering years between 1935 and 1955 was a corporate public, in both senses of the word. Public opinion of the day was not only underwritten and to some extent, shaped, by commercial sponsors. It was also portrayed as the expression of a singular body: the "American public." The "significant minorities," and more complex portraits of contending publics, would have to wait their turn.

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