PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
POLLING IN THE PUBLIC'S INTEREST

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No one understands better than this audience that we are awash in poll results in the United States. The torrent of factoids, marginals, and relationships inundates the public with increasing frequency (Ladd and Benson 1992). At the same time, the public is poorly equipped to digest and interpret all of these results. My fear is that the combination of this data overload and unscrupulous practices by marketers who ply their trade by simulating polls will increasingly turn the public off to the social and political value of survey research. If that happens, the public will be worse off, and for that reason, we need to do something about it.

My concern derives from the perspective of a citizen who is occasionally interested in public opinion—what current views are on a particular topic, what other citizens are thinking about, or even in conveying public views to elected officials. What information can citizens extract from the news stream about public opinion? How confident can they be that their own views are being accurately reflected in representations of "public opinion"? Should they place any faith at all in what they see or read about what the public thinks?

The Source of the Problem

Polling has become ubiquitous for a variety of reasons. Probably the most important is that the *cost of data collection* has declined, and anyone can get into the game for a marginal investment. We went through a technological shift with the advent of telephone interviewing (Frankovic 1992) that was spurred by the advent of high levels of telephone penetration, the development of the personal computer, and the design of new methods for producing representative samples from telephone households. The widespread availability of statistical software and eventually CATI applications was a bonus as well.

A second important factor was a set of *business and editorial decisions* by

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news organizations that they could produce their own data rather than accept the preprinted results from major national polling firms. By exercising independent judgments about newsworthy topics, writing their own questions, deciding on their field periods, and conducting their own analyses and writing them up, these organizations satisfied a long-standing institutional desire for independent fact gathering and interpretation. Eventually, these decisions carried over to the development of the networks' exit poll operations and then to the consolidation of these efforts (Mitofsky 1991).

More recently, the *rapid increase in the number of news outlets* that comes from the explosion in cable channels and Internet sites has created a thirst for content to fill all of this new time and space. In addition to new programming formats that blur the distinction between news and entertainment, measures of public opinion have also become a regular source of content for producers, hosts, and the experts who populate these shows. Polls and things that look like polls are produced on demand through the Internet in order to feed this almost insatiable appetite for content.

However, this is not just a problem of news organizations and changing definitions of the news. There have also been significant changes in the structure and organization of American politics. The *rise of interest groups* is one form of political activity that looks very different at the millennium than it did just 30 or 40 years ago (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Kollman 1998). It is, of course, many of the same new communication technologies that changed the news and the polling businesses that have altered the structure of politics as well. Interest groups are more numerous and sophisticated in the ways that they develop and maintain their membership base, as well as in the ways that they interact with policy makers and elected officials. One version of this group-based politics relies in large part on the representation of the policy interests of significant numbers of citizens.[1] The first step is to organize a group and solicit members, which is itself more commonly done on the Web now (Kim 2000). While the initial set of interests may be obvious, it is common to use some form of polling to measure the changing interests of the members or their current positions on important policy matters. Just as journalists have learned the value of anchoring a news story around a new poll result, so have interest groups learned to organize a press release or a press conference around new data. And the symbiotic nature of the relationship between journalists and their sources is a crucial element of news making organized around interest group polls.

The Problem and Its Manifestation

The proliferation of polls presents a problem for citizens who are at one and the same time generally interested in public opinion and what their fellow

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1. Although all organized groups reflect their members' interests, here the reference is to mass-based groups rather than lobbying firms.

citizens think and yet have almost no ability to differentiate good data from bad, useful information from useless, or to understand why two polls might produce seemingly different results.

Recent research clearly suggests that the public is interested in public opinion (Traugott et al. 1998). In fact, this interest can be measured across two distinct dimensions: an interest in what others citizens think about issues of the day (a horizontal dimension of communication between citizens) and the transmission of opinions and policy preferences to elected officials (a vertical dimension measuring perceptions of the attention that government should pay to polls). The most important predictor of whether a person believes that a poll should be used in policy or law making is the perception of its accuracy (Presser et al. 1999). In turn, the most important predictor of accuracy is whether or not the results conform to a person's own views on the issue at hand, a phenomenon that also explains why Congressional Democrats so often used public opinion in their defense of President Clinton during impeachment proceedings while Congressional Republicans tended to ignore the polls and argue on the basis of constitutional principles.

This is only one part of the story. Despite periodic public grousing about exit polls and their impact on the electorate, public confidence and interest in election polls as a whole remains very high (Traugott and Kang 2000). More people follow polls regularly than ever before; and in presidential campaigns, at least, significant numbers know who is ahead and behind (Lavrakas, Holley, and Miller 1991). In or outside of the election context, the reporting of poll results can influence people's views about issues. Especially when they do not bring strongly held positions of their own to their exposure to such results, citizens' attitudes can be formed by what they think others think.

What I see as the problem derives from the fact that study after study has shown that the public does not understand how polls are conducted or how the results should be interpreted (Lavrakas, Holley, and Miller 1991; O'Neill 1996; Traugott and Kang 2000). A majority of the public does not believe that typical samples can accurately reflect public views and does not know how to interpret the "margin of error" associated with a sample. They know even less about the impact of question wording or order, except perhaps in understanding the face *in*validity of extremely biased questions. The problem, then, derives from the flood of poll-based information directed at a public with almost no discriminatory powers to sort out the wheat from the chaff. It is no wonder that polls, especially in an election context, can generate a significant "third person" effect (Price et al. 1999).

How can the public get confused or misdirected? Let me cite just three instances of public opinion whereby the public could easily become confused about what their fellow citizens think. These are not intended as egregious examples of either bad polling or bad reporting on polls; these are interesting juxtapositions of similar data on the same topic. My point here is just to highlight how audience members exposed to such information can become

confused or be misled. Then I will also cite examples of the strategic uses of data by political groups interested in influencing policy, one more public than the other.

EXAMPLE I: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SENDING TROOPS TO BOSNIA

Here is an example of different poll results produced at the same point in time by two news organizations. They were each interested in assessing public support for sending troops to Bosnia in 1995. One concluded from its survey that the public supported sending troops, while the other concluded that the public opposed sending troops.

The Gallup Organization, on behalf of CNN and *USA Today*, asked the following question in concluding that Americans supported sending troops overseas:[2]

Now that a peace agreement has been reached by all the groups currently fighting in Bosnia, the Clinton Administration plans to contribute U.S. troops to an international peace-keeping force. Do you favor or oppose that? (CNN/USA Today/ Gallup)

	%
Favor	46
Oppose	40
Don't know	14

In the same period, CBS News asked the following question in concluding that Americans opposed sending troops overseas:[3]

Do you favor or oppose sending up to 20,000 U.S. troops to Bosnia, as part of a NATO peace-keeping force, to enforce this peace agreement between Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia? (CBS News)

	%
Favor	33
Oppose	58
Don't know	9

For trained survey researchers, it is obvious that the questions differ in the way that they are worded. The former invokes a response to an administration decision already made, while the latter makes no reference to it at all. The second question gives an indication of how large a troop commitment might

2. This was question 2 in a one-night telephone survey conducted by the Gallup Organization for the two news organizations with a sample of 632 respondents. In a Roper Center POLL data base retrieval, this was item USGALLUP.95NV27, R2.
3. This was question 4 in a one-night telephone call back survey on November 27, 1995, of 504 respondents previously interviewed on November 19. These results are essentially the same as those obtained in a survey conducted between October 22 and 24 using the same question wording. In a Roper Center POLL database retrieval, this was item USCBS.112895, R04.

be, while the first makes no mention of a specific number of troops. An experienced pollster, presented with details of the question wordings, would not be surprised at all by the differences in the resulting measurement of public opinion.

EXAMPLE 2: SUPPORT FOR BOMBING IN IRAQ

In the next example, two news organizations shared a common survey conducted by the Gallup Organization in 1998. They each apparently reviewed the results for the most newsworthy finding, and on the same day produced two radically different lead stories based upon the results from two different questions in the same survey.

CNN ran a story with the headline "Support Drops for Military Strikes against Iraq," based upon results from the following question:[4]

Do you support military action to resolve the situation in Iraq?

	Now (%)	February 1 (%)
Yes	41	50
No	54	46
Don't know, no opinion	5	4

After it looked at the survey results, *USA Today* decided to run a story under the headline "Public Solidly Supportive of Attacking Iraq" based upon the results from the following two questions about hypothetical or prospective government action:[5]

If the United States decided to take military action against Iraq, would you approve or disapprove of…

	%
Air attacks alone:	
Approve	76
Disapprove	19
Don't know, no opinion	5
Use of ground forces:	
Approve	60
Disapprove	36
Don't know, no opinion	4

What was the public to believe from these results about how Americans felt about prospective action against Iraq? Synthesized now but not so clearly

4. The survey was based upon interviews with 1,014 adults interviewed on the telephone between February 13 and 15. The CNN report can be found at www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1998/02/16/polls/iraq.
5. This story appeared on the front page of the February 17 edition of *USA Today*.

at the time, the answer seems to be that military action was not a preferred outcome, but if it occurred, the public would support it.

EXAMPLE 3: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR INS/JUSTICE DEPARTMENT ACTION IN TAKING ELIAN GONZALEZ

The almost insatiable thirst of new media news outlets for content has produced interesting uses and juxtapositions of poll data that will almost certainly become more frequent in the future. These often take the form of Web site tabulations of volunteered responses on topics of the day, typically reduced to their most simplistic form of "pick A or B." This occurred recently in the flurry of programming surrounding the INS/Justice Department raid to seize Elian Gonzalez from his Miami relatives in order to return him to his father.

In an unusual exchange that I believe unfortunately portends aspects of the future, Paula Zahn began a segment on a FOX news show that included an interview with Dick Morris, the political consultant and commentator, by indicating that current polling data showed that two out of three Americans supported the raid. Morris replied immediately that data collected on his proprietary site, vote.com, suggested just the opposite.

Gallup results from a one-night telephone survey conducted on April 24 with a national sample of 611 adults were as follows:[6]

As you may know, federal agents physically removed Elian Gonzalez from the home of his Miami relatives early Saturday morning, and took him to Washington D.C. to reunite him with his father. Do you approve or disapprove of that action?

	%
Approve	60
Disapprove	35
Don't know, no opinion	5

As a prelude to presenting the vote.com results, it is important to note that they in no way reflect a sample of the public. The site is a commercial enterprise of Morris's, launched in conjunction with his book of the same name. He is offering a venue for the voluntary expression of opinions that is explicitly linked to the transmission of e-mails containing a version of the participants' positions to "key decision-makers," in this case including members of Congress, President Clinton, and Attorney General Janet Reno. This

6. These Gallup results were obtained from a release on their Web site at the following address on April 25: www.gallup.com/poll,index.asp. These results mirror closely those from other polling organizations, as well as an overnight poll conducted by Gallup on April 22, when 57 percent approved of the action and 37 percent disapproved.

audience will recognize vote.com as nothing more than an Internet version of a self-selected listener opinion poll (SLOP).[7]

On the site, Web surfers were allowed to respond to the following item, with these results at the time Morris was on the air:[8]

Do you support the seizure of Elian?

	%
YES, necessary action was taken to reunite Elian with his father	41
NO, the Feds unreasonably used force to take the boy away	59

In addition to the issue of self-selected respondents, there are obvious differences in the question wording and the response alternatives that affected the distribution of responses.

EXAMPLE 4: THE STRATEGIC USE OF DATA BY POLITICAL INTERESTS

In another vein, interest groups increasingly employ data for strategic purposes. One form of such behavior is to hold a press conference to announce their latest poll results. This is a sophisticated way of getting their data into the news stream where the group can take advantage of media credibility as a way to enhance its own. One of the most blatant recent cases of this was the Contract with America, an instance that resulted in the AAPOR censure of the chief data spokesman for the Republican Party in this effort, Frank Luntz (Traugott and Powers 2000). It simply was not true that "each of the ten items on the list had registered at least 60 percent public approval in polls."

In a different research project stimulated by Diane Colasanto's AAPOR presidential address (1997), a content analysis of references to public opinion in the U.S. Congress showed that while representatives of interest groups composed only 15 percent of all witnesses appearing before committees in the U.S. House and Senate in a 4-month period, they made almost half (46 percent) of all the references to public opinion (Traugott and Kang 1999). People who cited public opinion overwhelmingly invoked it in favor of the position they took before the committee. Although two out of three invocations (64 percent) involved a reference to a specific study, less than one in 10 of those references included any details about the study such as a description of the sample, a description of the data collection methodology, or the exact wordings of the questions. This gives members of Congress or journalists

7. With due apologies to Norman Bradburn, in the new media environment perhaps we should adopt the acronym SSOP for Self-selected Surfer Opinion Polls.
8. By airtime, 174,607 responses had been recorded with these results. As of this writing, there are now 223,279 responses and the margin is 60–40 percent opposed to the government action (www.vote.com/vResults/index.phtml?voteID=7665645&cat=4075633).

who report on Congress little or no information to use as a basis for evaluating the accuracy of the claims.

I want to reiterate that these examples were selected not because they highlight egregious errors by specific polling organizations, journalists, or interest groups or reflect particularly poor judgments about how to describe or write about public opinion. Their use was intended to illustrate how hard it can be for members of the public to understand what it is that their fellow citizens are thinking about important issues of the day, especially when they involve complex matters about which they have little prior knowledge. For the most part, the only information they have on which to base their judgments is what they see, read, or hear in the media.

What We Need to Do about It

In other venues, I have expressed my views about what public polling organizations should try to do to improve their reporting of public opinion (Lavrakas and Traugott 1995, 2000). I would like to conclude today by suggesting some things that AAPOR could do to improve the quality of reporting of public opinion and thereby help citizens understand what others think about issues of the day and what kinds of messages about public preferences are being transmitted to elected officials and policy makers.

Public education about polling methods for every citizen is an important long-term goal for AAPOR, but it is not going to produce results in the short term and may not even help very many people in the long term. The key to providing more and better information to citizens is to improve the analysis and interpretation of reporting about public opinion by increasing our interactions with journalists. AAPOR needs to assist journalists in the presentation and interpretation of stories about polls by establishing and maintaining improved relations with them so we can help at the point at which they are preparing stories, rather than critiquing their performance after bad data or misinterpretations of data have become "common knowledge" through their entry into the news stream.

Today I want to propose a four-step program to engage AAPOR and journalists who report on polls in a mutually beneficial program to improve the reporting of public opinion. The four steps include the following:

1. Establish a press operation in conjunction with the AAPOR annual conference.

2. Conduct workshops for journalists in conjunction with the AAPOR annual conference.

3. Form a network of AAPOR members who conduct training for journalists in order to advertise these possibilities and improve the training through the sharing of content and techniques.

4. With external support, establish a consulting service for journalists so they can have access to high-quality assistance at little or no cost.

Let me say a little about what I have in mind here. In the interviews I conducted with executive directors of other professional organizations when we were thinking about long-range planning for AAPOR, we often touched upon the importance of the annual meeting or conference. Many associations have an explicit arrangement by which they set up a press operation in conjunction with their annual meeting, often because they have important new research findings that are being presented for the first time.

For AAPOR, the main purpose of such an effort would be to attract journalists to our conference so they could meet AAPOR members, listen to presentations about our work, and learn about who we are. We can ask the conference chair, who knows the conference program best, and the conference operations committee, who know the facilities best, to set up interview rooms where members who make especially noteworthy or newsworthy presentations will appear at specified times to talk with journalists about their work. We could even assist these AAPOR members in preparing press releases that summarize their work. In this way, journalists get to know and meet us, and vice versa.

While we currently have an excellent series of workshops for our members and are contemplating expanding this program, we should also think about ways that we can develop short courses for journalists. This would be a way for AAPOR to contribute to the introduction of more "precision" into journalism (Meyer 1991) by simultaneously providing a valuable service for journalists and another incentive for their editors and producers to pay for their attendance at the annual conference. Based upon my own experiences with journalists, the three most important topics on which we might focus initially would be a general introduction to polling methods, strategies for data analysis, and methods for researching and validating claims about public opinion. But we should establish a committee of interested AAPOR members who can review and recommend appropriate topics as well as volunteer as instructors.

This would not be difficult to do because I know from personal contacts that there is a small but critical mass of AAPOR members who are already engaged in journalistic training in public opinion research methods and analysis. We will be having a 1-week seminar for journalists in Ann Arbor this summer, and I know of several other efforts planned in conjunction with the 2000 presidential campaign. AAPOR can arrange for regular contact between these individuals through which they can share syllabi, reading lists, and discussions about the techniques they find most effective. This should improve the quality of training in all of these efforts. And through the use of an expanded AAPOR Web site, we can construct a calendar of offerings that notifies interested journalists of training opportunities throughout the year. We should also prepare a location on the Web site where journalists can send

inquiries about public opinion and polling issues of the day and where they will look for guidance and assistance in interpretation.

The last step in the program will be the hardest to accomplish but could have the most important short-term effect. AAPOR can form a core set of consultants who will offer to speak with journalists about a number of topics, including survey design, data analysis, and interpretation of results, as they prepare their stories. The important goals this function serves would be to help journalists to get the story right the first time and, sometimes, to keep bad data or unsupported claims out of the news stream. In order to make this service work, costs would ideally be reduced to zero through a search for external support from a foundation; as a result, ease of access and resulting use would be high. It will not be easy to establish such a service, nor to maintain it over an extended period of time; but it would represent one of the most important services that AAPOR could provide directly to journalists and thereby indirectly to the general public.

This is an ambitious agenda, but it represents work worth doing. It will engage AAPOR more actively and publicly in the dissemination of high-quality information about what we do and the results we produce, as well as in the interpretation of what others do. It will ultimately produce a more informed public—citizens who are more knowledgeable about what others think about issues of the day and who have more confidence that their views are being accurately transmitted to their elected representatives. In that regard, it will be AAPOR's contribution to polling in the public's interest.

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