

'Pollsters are like bacteriologists'

Gallup and Harris: 'Questionable' lives

By NICK GALLO
Of the Emerald

George Gallup once compared the public opinion pollster to a "bacteriologist who tests the quality of water in a reservoir by taking a few samples ... He can be certain that his tiny sample will accurately reflect the presence of harmful bacteria in the whole body of water."

But the question of how to measure that sample and when to dip into the living reservoir pose problems for the pollster. So much so that some critics feel the poll's relation to reality is often less than the shadows in Plato's cave.

But two Eugene organizations who do polling take issue, for the most part, with recent criticisms of pollsmanship.

In the summer of 1968 a Gallup poll and a Harris poll released within a week of one another produced widely divergent results. The pollsters quickly called a press conference and announced that they had tapped a massive shift in public opinion, one that corresponded to 10 million voters changing their minds in less than a week.

That very well could have happened, says Paul Nobisch, a political consultant with Mandate, a Eugene organization that does polling as well as campaign strategy and management for candidates.

"In an election year you have a very fluid situation up until the last few weeks of a campaign,"

says Nobisch. "Forty per cent of the voters can be undecided before a primary — there's just no initial commitment. No one has marked a ballot and very few have contributed a dollar to someone's campaign, so it's useless to be looking for a head count."

"All you can look for is which names the voters recognize and what their concerns are," Nobisch says.

The laws of probability say that a small sample of people can talk for millions of voters, but there is disagreement on what is the most accurate sample size for different elections.

Erica Jovet, who is also a political consultant at Mandate, says polls conducted through that firm use at least 600 respondents. She believes that direct, face-to-face interviewing with this sample size will yield no more than a four per cent margin of error.

Tom English, of English Research Associates, a public opinion and marketing research organization, claims that the interview is the essence of polling. His interviewers are trained to weigh nuances of opinion in addition to gather hard statistics in order to indicate the intensity of opinions recorded.

English adds that much of the art of polling is in the questionnaire design. Both he and Nobisch agree that it would be easy to rig a poll, as critics claim Gallup and Harris have done. But they see little purpose in leading questions.

"Much of our work is campaign strategy and if a question is unbalanced we won't be getting adequate sampling," Nobisch says. "If a client wants to word questions heavily one way or another we either won't do it or won't allow our names to be used. Our reputations are staked to these polls."

"Beware of polls bearing polls," a veteran pollster once warned, and English admits politicians can manipulate polls by selectively leaking parts of polls which reflect favorably upon that candidate.

Both organizations avoid telephone polling. There is the tendency for the respondents to say anything to get the pollsters off the line, according to English. He adds that it is still true today that low-income voters are more difficult to reach through this method.

English adds that the least effective polls are the mail-out polls and the straw polls, the type of survey that newspapers often run as elections draw near.

"Mail-out polls are pretty much self-serving advertising for politicians, but it's those newspaper polls that get me angry," he says. "There is no control over input, so special interest groups have a very good opportunity to influence the results. One group can collect ballots, clip them out and skew the results."

Some critics who have cast a cold eye to the pollsters have not

disputed their statistics, but the effects of polls upon the public. Is there a "bandwagon effect," a move by voters and financial contributors to play the winning horse? Or does the public flock to the "underdog?" Theories abound.

"No doubt polls affect voters in multiple ways, but no one knows for sure what really happens," Nobisch says. "I think it balances out in the end. A problem is that people set a poll up as a God when it is really only a road sign."

English noted, "It's hard to say in a close election what effect polls have, but I think election-day polls can have an impact. People think, 'Why should I vote when they already projected a winner?'"

Erica Jovet fingers the media for much of the blame. "In the '72 Nixon-McGovern race, the polling booths at the University district were swamped with voters," she said. "They called in for more election machines, but by the time

they arrived NBC had already declared Nixon the winner and the voters had gone home to stay home."

It should be recognized that pollsters have done extremely well predicting national elections (Gallup has picked 13 out of 14 Presidential winners and has a 1.6 per cent margin of error in those elections).

But do office holders listen to public opinion?

"Polls are a direct communicative link between the public and politicians," says Nobisch. "It's a very good way of influencing politicians and it is just as anonymous and sure as the ballot box, even more specific because issues are addressed."

English feels that legislators in Oregon are using polls more now to reveal their constituency's opinions. But he did admit that politicians seem to hire pollsters just before elections.

'None of the above'

Initiative petition could put another alternative on ballot

By TOM JACKSON
Of the Emerald

As the election systems in America are now formed, if a person has no preference for any of the candidates for a particular office, there are few alternatives short of not voting at all.

However, Gerald Locklear of Springfield is attempting to have an initiative petition placed on November's ballot. The act, if passed, would create another option for persons who do not want to vote for any of the candidates listed on the ballot.

The option is to vote for "none of the above."

Locklear explains that "in this country we think we have a participatory democracy, but this is an illusion because voters have almost no participation in the selection of candidates."

The initiative says that if the "none of the above" option receives a plurality of the votes, in effect, if it wins the election, then the office will be filled by a person appointed by the governor, but a special election must be run within 90 days of the election. It further states that none of the candidates for the office who were voted against (in favor of the none of the above option) will be allowed to re-enter their names on the special election ballot.

It would apply to all elective offices in Oregon, but Locklear says he would like to see a similar process on the federal level, to eliminate the electoral college in presidential elections.

"I hate being passive," he says. Oregon Daily Emerald


"I am angry because the citizens sell out and submit peacefully to having their minds seduced by all the rotten things that pervade our society," says Locklear.

"I'm fighting back." But Locklear is going to have a hard fight to collect the 46,235 signatures necessary to have the

initiative placed on the ballot. He says he has collected several hundred signatures in the past week.




Persons interested in aiding in the drive for signatures can contact Locklear at 260 'D' Street, #6, Springfield, OR., 97477. He can also be contacted at 747-8132.

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