

# Polls fed on straw votes. Quaker oats

*Editor's note: This is the first in a three-part series on political polls — their history, use, abuse and effect on the American political process. Thursday's story will deal with the psychology of polling. Friday the local and national polls that are currently being conducted in the Eugene area will be examined.*

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Of the Emerald

Quotes, anecdotes, straw votes and Quaker Oats have all contributed to what a "poll" is today.

What Noah Webster defines as a "voting or expression of individuals" has in the past 150 years become an integral part of our political and economic processes.

Polling, or the gauging of public opinion, had its origin, not surprisingly, in the newspaper business. According to Bernard Hennessy in his book "Public Opinion," political polling began early in the 19th century.

In 1824, the Harrisburg began using its reporters to check on popular support for the four presidential candidates of that year — Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams and William Crawford. This method, the random collection of opinion, became known as "straw polling."

Claude Robinson, of Claude Robinson Polls, Inc. defines a straw poll as an "unofficial canvass of an electorate to determine the division of popular sentiment on public issues or candidates for public office."

That early straw poll proved to be a successful one. The Pennsylvanian, claiming to have taken the poll "without discrimination of parties," published the results of the poll on July 24, 1824, showing Andrew Jackson as the popular choice for President. Jackson won the 1824 election.

The Encyclopedia Britannica declares that polling and political prediction is "an intermittent practice of United States journalism."

Intermittent as it may have seemed in the past, the practice of polling spread, with such newspapers as the New York collaborating with other newspapers nationwide. By 1912 presidential polls were conducted in 37 states and by 1920 the popularity of straw polling had exploded.

But straw polling can be unrepresentative and erroneous. "The chief problem with straw polling, as conducted," says Hennessy, "is that it is almost impossible to insure that the persons giving their opinions are representative of all the persons whose opinions are presumably being measured."

In other words, since people are not required to respond to straw polls, the conductor of the poll is inevitably tabulating the results of only those who felt like answering, not necessarily an accurate crosscut of the public.

For instance, the Omaha World Herald published poll results in 1960 which showed Richard Nixon leading by a 69 per cent majority. This is a clear indication of what Hennessy calls the "unrepresentativeness" of polls in that the World Herald published the ballots in its Sunday edition, which then had a circulation of 260,511 and readers from seven states returned only 1,262 ballots. The



Drawing by Tina Fong

opinion results, published in the Herald, represented only one half of one per cent of its readership.

An even better example, and probably the biggest polling blunder of our time, represents what Hennessy refers to as a "sampling error."

In 1936, the Literary Digest, already an established pollster, conducted a poll among persons whose names were collected from telephone books and automobile registration lists, a mistake that cost them their business.

The results of that poll showed Alfred Landon, Republican presidential candidate, to possess an Electoral College majority over Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

In the 1936 post-depression days, Republicans, being primarily in middle to upper-middle class brackets, were more likely to own cars and telephones than were Democrats. Thus the poll results were inaccurate, since they were overwhelmingly Republican in origin. Roosevelt's victory in 1936 reiterated this mistake, and the Digest went out of the polling business that year. It went completely out of business in 1938.

Nevertheless, journalistic "straw polling" is still very much alive. But the emergence of other factors applicable to polling, mainly its commercial use, has resulted in today's "scientific polling."

A company called Market Research, for instance, helped launch scientific polling because of a shift in corporate executive attention from production to marketing. This shift resulted from an excess of production capacity and a shrinkage of markets during World War I. Consumer consciousness came into existence and emphasis on what America wanted as purchasers came into focus.

About that time the Quaker Oats Company discovered it could "puff up" its grain cereal. According to survey results, the company renamed the product,

packaged it differently, gauging what the public wanted to see on the shelf and sold it at a higher cost to the consumer. This endeavor successfully resulted in the multi-million dollar giant of breakfast cereals.

But beyond just gauging economic and demographic facts lay psychological testing of the public. It became imperative, as a marketer, to understand human attitudes, motivation, conditioning through repeated stimuli, and creation and reinforcement of habit to learn to consistently please a large number of consumers plus retain their business.

Survery" which became known as the Roper Poll. Also, Crossley, Inc. began, in Hearst and other subscription newspapers, to do incidental political polls.

In October, 1935, the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) released its first scientific poll results. AIPO was formed by George Gallup. The Gallup poll is now America's most renowned and relied upon political poll. Gallup described the formation and objective of AIPO in these words:

"After a preliminary period of experiment, beginning in 1933, the AIPO, with the cooperation

**'...I don't think polls  
are here to stay.'**

Together with feeling out consumer wants and applying an understanding of human nature came the application of mathematical probability to polling. What brings modern polling into a "scientific" category is the combined application of appropriately worded questions, interviewing techniques, data analysis and probability.

The concept here is that pollsters can now measure public opinion reliably by gathering opinions only of selected persons, rather than making mass selections and chancing inaccurate results.

Says Hennessy, "Once there was understanding of the way in which sampling could be used to predict the uniformity of things that shared characteristics, it was only a step to sampling characteristic attitudes and opinions that people are assumed to share." Thus, scientific polls.

In 1935, kicking off the first "scientific" political polls, Fortune magazine released its "Fortune

and support of a number of American newspapers, began a series of week-by-week national polls which have continued to the present day. The institute's purpose was to perform the function of fact-finding in the realm of opinion in the same general way as the Associated Press, the United Press, and the International News Service functioned in the realm of event. This attempt to improve and objectify the reporting of what people think met with warm response and active encouragement from editors throughout the country."

In Oct. 31, 1960, Nixon's running mate Henry Cabot Lodge stated that public opinion polls were "passing fads." He predicted that, "In the future, people are going to look back on these polls as one of the hallucinations which the American people have been subjected to... I don't think polls are here to stay." Nixon and Lodge were shown at that time to be running behind in most major polls.

The result is history.

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