

Opinion experts may kindle hope, create underdogs or undercut campaigns all by how they interpret



Graphic by Joe Sacco

University professor examines sampling

How are polls born?

A Gallup poll samples 300 geographical areas randomly, according to journalism Prof. James Lemert. The samples are chosen to reflect the characteristics of the country's population.

In other words, if 10 percent of the population is wealthy, 10 percent of the chosen districts are wealthy. Five people from each district are interviewed, for a total sample of 1,500 people.

Telephone interviews are used for quickie polls but, in general, personal interviews are made, Lemert says. In effect, each interviewer conducts five interviews.

"The interviewer — usually an experienced part-time employee, is told what area to work as well as something like, 'Take the second house in the third block on Eleventh Avenue and keep going until you get an adult male who's eligible to vote.'"

Polling organizations will trade interviewer lists. Lemert says he has hired people who've worked for both Harris and Gallup.

"A statewide poll of Oregon operates about the same as Gallup," says Lemert, "except a smaller sample is generally taken."

The Jay Bardsley firm which conducts the Oregonian's polls, typically interviews about 750 voters, as opposed to Gallup's 1,500. Their percentage of error is about twice as great because of the fewer numbers, says Lemert.

Stories by BILL KOGUT
Of the Emerald

Hubert Humphrey had entered the 1972 Presidential race late and desperately needed a victory against George McGovern in the June California primary.

Ten days before the balloting, a poll was released in the afternoon that showed McGovern way out in front. That evening, when Humphrey's campaign manager arrived at Humphrey campaign headquarters, there was only one campaign volunteer in all of the offices.

That lone volunteer was drunk on the floor.

A politician's epigram goes, "Volunteers thrive on hope." Unfavorable public opinion polls can kill that hope, frighten off potential campaign contributors, and scare away voters.

Campaigns become derailed if polls come out showing a candidate far behind, says University Journalism Professor Jim Lemert.

Since funds dry up, says Lemert, the trailing candidate is forced to spend more time persuading the so-called "fat cats" to contribute to his campaign and in the process loses valuable campaign time.

"In June of 1974 during the Brown-Flornoy race for governor of California, a field poll came out that showed Flornoy behind," Lemert says. "In August, another

poll came out that showed the gap between the two men in the polls had widened.

Money that had been promised didn't arrive and, as a result, Flornoy spent the next two months looking for funds. Finally, money started to flow back when the Flornoy organization had a private polling organization do a poll for them and then leaked the results. But, as a consequence Flornoy had had no voter visibility for two months.

As it turned out, the evidence is that Brown indeed had a fairly large lead, which almost disappeared — he barely won. One wonders what the outcome might have been had Flornoy not been so distracted.

After that poll came out 10 days before the election, barely any of the volunteers returned to the headquarters and McGovern just barely beat Humphrey. Again, the outcome was so close it's very tempting to say that probably the results of that election were changed by that poll.

"But it was not because it affected voters directly; it was because it effected the morale and the money."

There isn't much evidence supporting the contention that polls

can have a bandwagon effect on voters, Lemert says.

Jay Bardsley, poll taker for 'The Oregonian,' agrees, but disagrees on the effect polls can have on campaign workers.

They don't have much effect on campaign workers in a two-way race, he says, but can have an effect on workers in a three-way race.

In the McCall-Martin-Atiyeh Republican primary race Bardsley says, polls showing Martin way off the pace encouraged Martin's anti-McCall supporters to switch to Atiyeh.

Bardsley says the accuracy of his polls range up to 4 percentage points, depending upon the number of voters interviewed.

These percentages of possible error in combination with a time lag of three days between the taking of interviews and the publication of poll results, make it hard to accurately discern and evaluate last minute trends, Bardsley says.

In other words, a close race with a large number of undecided voters going to the polls, cannot be counted on to correctly pick the winner.

Atiyeh's campaign manager,

(Continued on Page 14)

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