7 Polls and Elections

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Election surveys are the polls that are most familiar to Americans for a number of reasons. First, there are so many of them, and they receive so much media coverage. Second, election polls generate a lot of controversy and hence media coverage under specific circumstances. One such circumstance is when the preelection polls are wrong. Elections are one the few topics for which there is a benchmark to measure the accuracy of the poll—the benchmark being the actual Election Day result. We can compare how close the poll prediction was to the actual vote outcome. Keep in mind, however, that if the Election Day outcome was 51–49 and the poll predicted 49–51, the poll's prediction was actually very accurate when one factors in the sampling error of the poll. Another situation in which election polls generate controversy occurs when multiple preelection polls conducted in close proximity to Election Day yield highly disparate results. That is, some polls might predict a close election, and others predict a more lopsided contest. Although the most prominent election polls in the United States focus on the presidential contest, polling is conducted in almost every election battle, ranging from Congress to state and local races to ballot issues at the state and local levels. Indeed, election polling has become an international phenomenon, even in countries where the history of free and open elections is relatively short.

In 2014 and 2015, there were numerous instances in the United States and abroad in which the polls did a poor job of predicting the actual election outcomes. In Great Britain, the polls sharply underestimated the popular support for Prime Minister David Cameron and his Conservative Party; likewise, in Israel, pollsters failed to capture the surge for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ruling coalition. In the United States, most polls incorrectly predicted that Democrat Jack Conway would be elected governor of Kentucky; he lost by a substantial margin (nine points)

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to his Republican opponent, Matt Bevin. In 2014, most polls predicted an easy reelection victory (the average poll margin was almost 10 percent) for Virginia Democratic U.S. senator Mark Warner; on election night, he won by less than 1 percent. These and other unexpected results have led to an increased critical focus on election polling and its shortcomings.

Zukin (2015), Cohn (2015a, 2015b), and others have identified a number of key developments that have made election polling less reliable: the growing reliance on cell phones, the decline in response rates, and the rise of Internet polling. As discussed in Chapter 5, the first two developments have made high-quality polling more expensive because of the need for multiple callbacks to contact a respondent and because of the longer time in general to complete a poll. Thus, some polling organizations are looking for cheaper ways to conduct surveys, and these often involve using the Internet. But Internet polling has limitations, including the fact that Internet usage is not universal among Americans. Approximately 90 percent use the Internet, but as Zukin observes, Internet utilization correlates inversely with age and the propensity to vote. That is, 97 percent of young citizens aged eighteen to twenty-nine use the Internet, but they composed just 14 percent of the 2014 (a midterm election) electorate. Only 60 percent of those sixty-five and over use the Internet, yet they constituted 22 percent of the 2014 electorate. Clearly, Internet polling may face challenges in accurately reflecting the electorate unless some appropriate statistical adjustments are made. A more serious problem with Internet polling, mentioned in Chapter 5, is that often the samples are self-selected, nonprobability samples, which means sampling error and the precision of estimates cannot be determined. Alternatively, there are more rigorous, high-quality Internet polls in which the sample is selected from a large panel of citizens who have been recruited to the panel by a variety of means. Cohn (2015b) argues that Internet election polling is still in its infancy but is growing exponentially. Examining comparable time periods and comparable election cycles in 2011 and 2015, he points out that only twenty-six online surveys had been conducted versus more than one hundred live interview telephone surveys. But in 2015, the comparable figures were ninety Internet surveys and ninety-six traditional telephone polls. We will discuss, later in this chapter, the accuracy of Internet and telephone polls in the 2012 presidential election. One difference that Cohn observed between Internet and telephone polls in 2015 dealing with the GOP presidential nomination battle was that Donald Trump performed measurably better in online surveys than in telephone polls with live interviewers. One speculative explanation for this pattern was that Americans were more reticent to indicate support for Trump when being interviewed by a real person. After all, when so many

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observers, pundits, and his fellow Republicans are criticizing Trump for some of his outrageous views and statements, some citizens may feel embarrassed to admit their support for Trump. But in the anonymity of an online survey, as well as in the anonymity of the actual voting booth, more citizens may be willing to express their support for Trump. If this notion is correct, then the online surveys may prove to be more accurate than the traditional telephone polls. But what if the online surveys make it too easy for respondents to declare their candidate preferences and to claim that they will vote? Perhaps, then, the Trump support is overestimated. We will say more about Trump support later in this chapter when we discuss the difficulty in using polls to estimate likely turnout in elections and especially in caucus states such as Iowa.

Sponsors of Election Polls

A variety of individuals and organizations, such as candidates for office, political parties, the news media, and polling organizations themselves, all conduct election polls. The candidates and parties use polls as research tools, collecting information to devise winning campaign strategies. Typically, candidate-sponsored polls survey citizens on their sociodemographic characteristics, their perceptions of the candidates, and their views on issues. The candidates can then determine how well they are running overall, how their campaigns are going within important subgroups, and how campaign events and advertising affect their standing among the voters. For polling organizations, election polls can be a revenue source as well as an opportunity to get free publicity when the media cover the organization's surveys.

As for the mass media, election polls are a central focus of their election coverage, and they have been criticized for treating elections as if they were horse races, emphasizing not what the candidates say on the issues but their relative standing in the polls (Asher 1992, 273–278): Who's ahead? Who's behind? Who's gaining? Who's falling back? Yet polls also often go beyond recording levels of support for the candidates and address topics such as patterns of support for the candidates among groups of voters defined by their demographic characteristics and issue stances.

This chapter describes the types and uses of polls that are common in election campaigns. It examines candidates' and parties' attempts to use polls for purposes other than research and to manipulate media coverage of polls. It addresses the role of polling during the presidential primary season, as well as the general election campaign, and how and why polls can go wrong in making election predictions. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on how polls can affect the way citizens vote.

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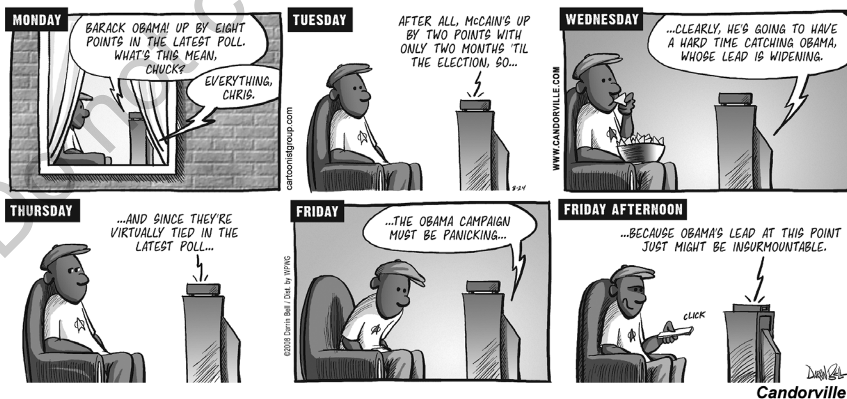
Types of Election Polls

The many kinds of election polls differ less in their methods than in the purposes they serve. For example, some of the candidate- and party-sponsored polls, such as tracking surveys, serve as the private tools of a campaign; media-generated surveys, such as exit polls, often become topics of public controversy as well as a tool for media reporting of election results. It is important for consumers of public opinion polls to be aware of the different kinds of surveys and what they can say about elections.

Benchmark Surveys

A candidate usually commissions a benchmark survey at the time he or she decides to seek office. It collects standard information about the candidate's public image and positions on issues and about the demographics of the electorate to provide a baseline for evaluating the progress of a campaign. Three important pieces of information often gathered in a benchmark survey are the candidate's name recognition level, the candidate's electoral strength vis-à-vis that of opponents, and citizens' assessments of an incumbent officeholder's performance.

One problem with a benchmark survey is its timing. The earlier it is done, the less likely it is that the respondents will know anything about the challenger and the more likely it is that the political and economic situation will change dramatically as the election nears. Nevertheless, useful information can be collected about voters' perceptions of the strengths and



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weaknesses of the incumbent, their perceptions of the ideal candidate, and their views on major policy issues. The results of a benchmark survey normally are not publicized or leaked unless they show the candidate doing surprisingly well.

Trial Heat Surveys

Technically, a trial heat survey is not a survey but a question or series of questions within a survey. Trial heat questions pair competing candidates and ask citizens whom they would vote for in such a contest.

Typically, a trial heat question reads, "If the election were held today, would you vote for *x* or *y*?" Sometimes questions are asked about hypothetical matchups, particularly in the earlier stages of the presidential selection process. Even before the 2010 midterm elections were over, pollsters were already asking the American electorate about hypothetical matchups in the 2012 presidential contest, such as Barack Obama versus Mitt Romney and Barack Obama versus Sarah Palin. The results of these trial heat questions facilitate the "horse race" emphasis in media coverage of election campaigns; they are fun and often become the grist for interesting political speculation and gossip.

Several caveats apply, however, to the results of trial heat questions, the most important of which is that much can change between the time a question is asked and the actual voting on Election Day. This observation is best illustrated by the dramatic fluctuations in support for the presidential candidates in 2000. For example, a Reuters/MSNBC/Zogby poll in early August of that year gave Bush a seventeen-point lead over Gore; by early October, the poll was indicating that Gore had a four-point lead. Equally dramatic changes can occur in a much shorter time. For example, a *New York Times*/WCBS-TV poll less than two weeks before the 1993 New Jersey gubernatorial contest showed incumbent Democratic governor Jim Florio with a 49 percent to 34 percent lead among registered voters—and an even larger lead among likely voters—over his Republican opponent, Christine Todd Whitman. But on Election Day, Whitman was the victor. In California's 1994 gubernatorial race, Democratic challenger Kathleen Brown was more than twenty points ahead of the Republican incumbent, Pete Wilson, in trial heat polls conducted months before the election. But Wilson defeated Brown by a 15 percent margin. In 2010, in the special election to fill the seat of the late U.S. senator Ted Kennedy, a poll done two weeks before the election showed Democrat Martha Coakley ahead by fifteen percentage points, a lead that grew to seventeen points when undecided leaners were allocated (Viser and Phillips 2010). Yet on Election Day, the Republican Scott Brown won by five points. In this contest, which had great national significance, there were signs that Coakley's lead was not as

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insurmountable as it seemed. Indeed, in the *Boston Globe* poll that had her ahead by fifteen points, the two candidates were tied among the 25 percent of the respondents who said they were extremely interested in the race, and Scott Brown had a good favorable-to-unfavorable rating given that he was a relatively unknown candidate at the outset. The lesson of all these examples is that it is not over until it is over.

Trial heat questions asked far in advance of an election measure name recognition more than anything else, particularly in less prominent election contests. The consumers of such surveys must be careful not to view trial heat placements as immutable, nor should they be surprised when the standings of the candidates change dramatically over the course of the campaign. Moreover, consumers must also be careful in assessing the results of a trial heat question because those results depend on how the question is constructed. For example, when the political party affiliation of the candidate is given, the outcome is bound to be affected. With well-known candidates, it makes little difference whether party affiliation is mentioned, but in races between less well-known candidates, it can make a substantial difference if the question is phrased, "Mary Doe versus Joe Blitz" or "Mary Doe, the Democrat, versus Joe Blitz, the Republican."

Tracking Polls

Tracking polls provide the most up-to-date information on which to base changes in campaign strategy and media advertising. A tremendous resource for candidates, these polls are often conducted on a daily basis near election day to monitor closely any late shifts in support. Because tracking polls are expensive, they rely on rolling samples. For example, samples of 200 different people may be collected on four consecutive days. Although an *N* of 200 is small and has a large sampling error, an *N* of 800 is much more reliable. But much can happen between the first and fourth day of interviewing, perhaps making the oldest interviews less interesting to the campaign. Thus, on the fifth day, another 200 people are interviewed and added to the sample, and the first 200 responses are discarded. And on the sixth day, another 200 people are interviewed, and the 200 interviews done on the second day are eliminated. This procedure guarantees an overall sample of 800 that includes 200 new interviews each day, thereby allowing a close and timely monitoring of voters' reactions to the campaign. One danger of tracking polls is that any single day's interviews could be highly aberrant; the candidate and campaign must be careful not to overreact to what might be only a statistical blip.

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Tracking polls were prominent in the 2000 presidential campaign but less so in 2004 (Traugott 2005) and 2008 when more resources were devoted to polling in key battleground states and more media attention was given to those battleground state results. Undoubtedly, the key role played by Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004 sensitized the media that a presidential contest is not simply a national popular-vote contest to be measured by national tracking polls but is also an Electoral College competition where the key battleground states will determine the outcome in a close contest. In 2000, as Election Day approached, the results of various media-sponsored tracking polls converged to yield predictions very close to the actual election outcome. But throughout the campaign, one particular tracking poll—that conducted by the Gallup Organization for CNN and *USA Today*—showed dramatic fluctuations over very short time periods. For example, one set of results showed Gore ahead by eleven points, yet two days later, Bush was up by seven. Such substantial volatility surprised observers, who questioned the accuracy of the Gallup results. It turned out that one reason for the results was dramatic variation in the proportions of Democrats and Republicans in their samples over short periods of time (Morin and Deane 2000). When the sample had relatively more Democrats, Gore did better, and vice versa. Gallup argued that the short-term fluctuations

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in the distribution of partisanship were genuine. Other polling organizations made different decisions and weighted their results so that the proportion of Democrats and Republicans did not vary as much with each night's sampling, and their results did not show as much volatility. Abramowitz (2006) argues, in general, for weighting the number of Democrats and Republicans in any particular sample, based on a moving average of the proportion of Democrats and Republicans taken from surveys conducted over several weeks. This procedure will lessen the dramatic changes observed from sample to sample in such measures as vote intention and presidential approval when the changes are largely an artifact of the different proportion of Democrats and Republican from one sample to another. Whether or not to weight on party identification remains a topic of controversy.

While tracking polls are typically conducted either by campaigns or by news organizations, the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections saw the most ambitious and extensive use of rolling samples to measure the dynamics of the presidential campaign. The National Annenberg Election Survey conducted in each of those election cycles entailed a complex research design with rolling samples, panel survey, and other impressive design features. This elaborate design enabled researchers to study campaign dynamics over a lengthy period to ascertain what voters learned about the candidates and how their views changed over time in response to particular campaign events and media coverage.

Cross-Sectional Versus Panel Surveys

When the major polling organizations conduct multiple polls over time in an election contest, they generally use a *cross-sectional design* in which different samples of citizens are selected for each round of interviewing. For example, in the 2004 presidential contest, CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup polls conducted before and after the Republican convention tried to assess the postconvention bounce in the polls that Bush gained. The preconvention poll showed Bush ahead of Kerry 50 percent to 47 percent among likely voters, whereas the postconvention poll showed Bush ahead 52 percent to 47 percent. Each of these surveys provides a picture of where the electorate stood at a single point in time, and each is based on a different sample.

A comparison of the two surveys reveals that the Bush lead went from 3 percent to 5 percent (subject to sampling error) and that the net gain for Bush was 2 percent. But what pattern of movement produced this net gain? Perhaps 2 percent of the undecided moved to Bush. But perhaps 10 percent of Kerry supporters moved to Bush while 10 percent of Bush supporters moved to Kerry, and 2 percent of the undecided moved to Bush. Either hypothetical scenario yields a net gain of 2 percent, but the total percentage of citizens changing their preferences varies dramatically—2 percent in the first instance and 22 percent in the latter.

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Unfortunately, cross-sectional surveys reveal only the net change; they cannot tell poll consumers about the gross change or about the pattern of individual changes that produced the net result. Thus, cross-sectional surveys are fine for revealing net changes in the relative standing of the candidates, but a *panel design* is needed if the total volatility of voters' attitudes and preferences is the chief concern.

In a panel survey, the same individuals are interviewed two or more times—a more costly and difficult process because the same respondents must be located repeatedly, no easy task in view of the mobility and mortality of respondents. For example, conducting panel surveys of college students over a period of months or years can be burdensome because of the high mobility of that group. Another problem is that respondents may not be willing to participate in multiple interviews, and respondents who do agree to be reinterviewed may differ in distinct ways from those who do not. A final problem with panel surveys is that the experience of being interviewed the first time may affect the respondent's answers at the next interview. Despite these difficulties, panel surveys provide better information about the dynamics of the campaign and voter decision-making than do cross-sectional surveys. Panel surveys reveal more volatility in voters' preferences than do cross-sectional surveys.

Focus Groups

Focus groups can be an important campaign tool, even though voters may never hear of them. Technically, focus groups are not polls but in-depth interviews with a small number of people (usually ten to twenty), who often are selected to represent broad demographic groups. A focus group might watch a candidate debate and offer reactions, thereby helping the candidate to prepare better for the next debate. Or a group might be asked to react to a political commercial so that campaign managers can gain some insight into its effectiveness before spending money to air it. Focus group discussions also are useful in raising and developing questions that later may be incorporated into a public opinion poll.

The effectiveness of focus groups was illustrated most famously in the 1988 election, when the Bush campaign team called on a group to identify the "hot-button" issues that it later used with devastating effect against Bush's Democratic opponent, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, in the general election. The campaign team invited two-dozen New Jersey residents to a local hotel to talk about the candidates. Many of the participants were blue-collar and Catholic Democrats who had supported Reagan but intended to vote for Dukakis, even though they knew little about him. Because these Reagan Democrats were seen as critical to a Bush victory, the focus group leader pushed until issues emerged that moved the participants away from support for Dukakis. The issues turned out to be Dukakis's

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opposition to the death penalty, his opposition to a bill requiring Massachusetts schoolchildren to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and his support of a weekend furlough program for prisoners (among them the infamous Willie Horton). The reactions of the focus group participants told the Bush team that it had found the issues it needed to undermine the Dukakis campaign. It would have been much more difficult to generate this information through a public opinion survey. As Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater commented, "Focus groups give you a sense of what makes people tick and a sense of what's going on with people's minds and lives that you simply don't get from reading survey data" (Grove 1988b).

Many years ago, Morin (1992c) pointed out that focus groups have become very popular with newspapers and television networks, which frequently commission them. Although Morin applauds focus groups as another tool for journalists, he warned that the media often fail to recognize the limitations of this method. Certainly, one caveat is that focus groups are not mini-public-opinion surveys. Focus groups may suffer from problems of external validity—that is, the results of the focus group may not be generalizable to any broader population because the participants may not be representative. Nevertheless, the process of intensive discussion within a focus group may provide insights into what factors are motivating citizens, insights that a standard public opinion survey does not readily reveal. In the early 1990s, a report prepared for the Kettering Foundation relied heavily on focus group methodology (Harwood Group 1993). Titled *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships With Public Concerns*, the report argued that if political leaders really want to engage citizens in key public policy concerns, they and the media may need to devise new ways to reach that goal. Among the report's recommendations was a call for more "mediating institutions" where citizens can interact directly and discuss the issues of the day. Sensitive to the limitations of the focus group method, the Kettering report stated in its appendix on methodology,

> There are, of course, limitations to group discussions. The research is qualitative. Thus, the observations detailed in this report should not be mistaken for findings from a random sample survey. They are, technically speaking, hypotheses, or insights, that would need to be validated by reliable quantitative methods before being considered definitive. Still, the insights are suggestive of how citizens view public concerns and their relationships to them.

In observing focus group sessions dealing primarily with local government topics, such as the quality of city services or the performance of the local school system, I have been struck by how often the sessions take a critical and negative turn. One focus group participant relates a horror story, leading others to join in with their own awful anecdotes. Soon the focus group becomes a gripe session. Would public opinion polls on

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the same topics elicit as much intensely negative content? I doubt it. A 1996 book on gender relations by Roberta Sigel, who employed both focus groups and surveys in her work, supports my speculation. In general, Sigel's focus group data—more than her survey information—showed women to be angry about gender discrimination and mistreatment they had endured as women. Sigel attributed the differences in the focus group responses and the survey responses in part to the different modes of data collection. In other words, focus groups do not yield the same kinds of information as surveys and polls. Focus groups are fine research tools for certain purposes, but citizens should be wary of accepting general descriptions and explanations of people's attitudes and behavior based solely on a focus group. But for candidates and their campaigns, a focus group can be an effective tool for testing campaign themes, messages, and commercials.

Deliberative Opinion Polls

A deliberative opinion poll combines elements of both the focus group and the standard public opinion poll—that is, it brings together a representative group of citizens, provides them with information and the opportunity for discussion on issues and then polls them on those issues. Fishkin (1992, 1996) sets out the rationale and need for deliberative polls, arguing that public opinion surveys measure what the public thinks but not what people would think if they had the opportunity to meet and become immersed in the issues through discussion and study. A deliberative poll is an expensive and challenging undertaking because it requires bringing together a representative sample and providing fair and balanced materials about the issues at hand.

The first major deliberative poll in the United States took place in Austin, Texas, in January 1996 in the context of the presidential election (Merkle 1996; Winkler 1996). A representative sample of Americans was surveyed about their opinions in three main issue areas: foreign policy, the economy, and family concerns. Then, a subset of the sample attended the National Issues Convention in Austin where, after extensive presentations and discussions on the same issue domains, members of the subset were polled again to determine whether and how their views had changed. Attitude changes did occur. For example, support for U.S. military engagement abroad rose, and support for a flat income tax declined. The respondents' views about the biggest problems facing American families moved toward economic concerns and somewhat away from the breakdown of traditional family values.

The key question arising from this deliberative poll is to what extent its users can generalize its conclusions to the broader population. Fishkin (1996) would argue that because the sample was representative, similar attitude changes might be expected in the population at large. But one of the major criticisms of Fishkin's claim is that citizens in the real world—and the election campaign itself—do not operate in the same way as the

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National Issues Convention (Mitofsky 1996). Most people do not take the time to learn, nor are they exposed to information about the issues or candidates in such a concentrated and thorough way. Even though small group discussions may occur in the real world, much of what citizens experience and learn comes directly from campaign ads, news coverage, and the like. Moreover, critics faulted the representativeness of the 1996 sample and also cited the intrusive effects of television, which heightened the respondents' awareness that they were participating in a very special event. That awareness might have unduly influenced participants' reactions to the deliberative polling experience.

Even if the real-world prospects for deliberative polling are less than its adherents believe, the rationale for the enterprise is clear. Traditional public opinion polls capture what is immediately on the voters' minds, and as noted in Chapter 2, they often are plagued by nonattitudes. Moreover, candidates tend to treat citizens' opinions as something to manipulate through political advertising and campaign rhetoric. A deliberative poll, by contrast, can reveal what citizens think once they are informed about an issue. Whether such results would ever constrain candidates or influence politics and elections remains doubtful. Sturgis, Roberts, and Allum (2005) argued that even if participation in a deliberative poll influenced attitude distributions and information levels, there was little evidence of any increase in the internal consistency of the attitudes participants held.

Interest in deliberative polls waned in the 2000 election, but a fascinating example of a deliberative poll occurred in January 2003 (Fishkin, Luskin, and Brady 2003). A scientifically selected sample of 343 Americans was polled by phone on topics such as Iraq, international security issues, and foreign aid. The respondents were then brought together to experience the deliberative process and subsequently reinterviewed on the same topics. Participants in the deliberative process became more likely to see Iraq as a threat, but they also grew more skeptical about the United States going it alone on Iraq and other matters. They became more supportive of U.S. rebuilding of Iraq once the prospective war was over. And they became generally more positive about the United States exercising leadership in world affairs and being more generous in providing foreign aid to other nations. That the results of this deliberative process received little media attention was frustrating to the sponsors of the deliberative poll. They argued that their results were important and worthy of news coverage because they showed what citizens' preferred policies were once they had become informed on the issues.

Fishkin (2009) has argued that a deliberative polling approach to the traditional town hall meeting may be more beneficial to both citizens and elected officials. He noted that in 2009, many of the town hall meetings conducted by members of Congress back in their districts turned into ugly shouting matches dominated by the most extreme voices. A deliberative

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polling approach would enable a more civilized, informed discussion, in which reasoned opinions would not be drowned out by theatrics. But would citizens want to participate in such an enterprise? Neblo et al. (2010) argue yes in their research; they found that Americans were more willing than expected to participate in a deliberative process. Moreover, those citizens who were less likely to engage in traditional partisan politics were more receptive to trying the deliberative approach.

Exit Polls

Exit polls, as noted in Chapter 1, are interviews with voters as they leave polling places. These very visible and controversial polls typically ask voters whom they voted for. They also collect some information on the issue positions and demographic characteristics of the respondents. The most prominent exit polls are conducted by the major news organizations to predict and explain presidential election outcomes as well as the results of congressional and major state-level races.

Exit polls have several advantages and uses. First, they are polls of actual voters, and so they avoid the enduring problem that preelection surveys face of determining who will actually vote. Second, exit poll samples are collected in many states, allowing state-by-state analysis of the presidential election—an endeavor not feasible with national surveys of 1,500 respondents, which are not amenable to breakdowns by state. Third, exit polls can be tabulated quickly, allowing almost instantaneous predictions and descriptions of election outcomes. Indeed, this advantage became a central selling point for exit polls, as the television networks competed with one another to be the first to call an election. Finally, exit polls generate rich information that enables both journalists and social scientists to understand better the factors that help to shape the voters' choices.

Exit polls are generally accurate, although recent developments in the mechanics of how Americans vote might affect their predictive ability. Numerous states are making it easy to vote by absentee ballot. Oregon votes entirely by mail, and more states are permitting voting prior to Election Day. For example, the key battleground state of Ohio moved to no-fault absentee voting in 2006, as well as early, in-person absentee voting. Early voting is on the increase, with estimates suggesting that 13 percent of the 2000 election vote was cast early, about 20 percent in 2004, and approximately 25 percent in 2008. Election Day exit polling will not capture those votes. Pollsters therefore must conduct preelection polls in states with a substantial amount of early voting to estimate how the early voters behaved and then combine those estimates with the exit polls that are done on Election Day to generate accurate predictions. This makes exit polling a more challenging task and raises the possibility of errors as the preelection and the Election Day votes are combined.

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Occasionally, exit poll results are inaccurate. For example, an exit poll in the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial race showed the black Democratic candidate, Douglas Wilder, winning by 10 percent of the vote, when he actually won by less than 1 percent. The explanation for this inaccuracy is that some white respondents in the exit poll indicated that they had voted for Wilder when they had not (Traugott and Price 1992). As another example, the exit poll in the 1992 GOP presidential primary in New Hampshire showed George Bush with only a six-point margin over Republican challenger Pat Buchanan, when his lead in the actual vote count was sixteen points. The discrepancy was attributed, in part, to the greater intensity of Buchanan supporters and their greater willingness to participate in the exit polling (Mitofsky 1992; Morin 1992a).

Exit polls helped create storms of controversy on election night in 1980 and again in 2000 and 2004 (but not in the 2006, 2008, and 2010 elections). In 1980, the national preelection polls had indicated a close race between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, but the results from the eastern time zone revealed that a Reagan landslide (especially in the Electoral College) was developing. What troubled many observers was that within minutes after the polls closed in a state, the television networks would declare—on the basis of exit polls and not official election returns—that Reagan had carried that state. By 8:30 p.m. eastern standard time (EST), it was clear from exit poll results that Reagan had won enough states to ensure his election, no matter what happened in the states west of the Mississippi, where the polls were still open (strong Reagan states in any event). Thus, the networks declared Reagan the victor while parts of the country were still voting. Moreover, Carter conceded the election before all of the polls had closed. Understandably, many concerns were raised about the effects of news media declarations of victory when some voters had not yet cast their ballots. There were reports that voters in line at polling places left when they heard that the presidential race was already decided and that other citizens decided not to go to the polls at all. In 1984, Democrat Walter Mondale wisely waited until the polls were closed on the West Coast before conceding, as did Michael Dukakis in 1988.

Did the early call of the 1980 presidential election actually deter citizens from voting? The empirical evidence is mixed (Delli Carpini 1984; Epstein and Strom 1984; Jackson 1983; Jackson and McGee 1981; Sudman 1986). It is clear that the early projections had no significant impact on the outcome of the presidential race in 1980, but in state and local contests, turnout effects, no matter how small, could have been much more consequential. In those elections, fewer votes are cast, and the margin between victory and defeat is sometimes very small.

In the 2000 election, the major television networks twice made predictions about the outcome of the presidential contest in the key state of Florida that never should have been made. Early on election night, the

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networks projected Vice President Gore as the winner. Much later in the evening, they projected that Governor Bush had won Florida—another forecast that had to be withdrawn but one that nonetheless gave Bush a major strategic advantage in the postelection Florida recount battle. Mitofsky (2001) explained that the incorrect Gore prediction may simply have been a case of the sampled precincts yielding a bad estimate, whereas the later Bush prediction was less a problem with exit polling than a case of flawed communications among entities tabulating the vote.

Election night in 2002 witnessed a computer-programming problem with respect to the exit polls. It led the networks to ignore exit polls in their election night coverage and rely instead on the actual vote tabulations (Kurtz 2002; Plissner 2003; Torry 2002). The problems in 2000 and 2002 led six news organizations—ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, and the Associated Press—to disband the Voter News Service, which had been the umbrella organization responsible for collecting exit-polling data, and create a new consortium called the National Election Pool, which had the responsibility for constructing exit-polling capacity for the 2004 and 2008 elections. (For a comprehensive discussion of the exit-polling fiasco in 2000 and how the Voter News Service performed, see the "Review Symposium: Election Night 2000 in Perspective," a collection of articles in the spring 2003 issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*.)

In 2004, a major exit poll controversy erupted as exit polls were leaked throughout Election Day by various media sources. Most of the leaks suggested that John Kerry would carry such key states as Ohio and Florida and, if that were true, would oust George Bush and be the next president of the United States. When the votes were actually counted, Bush had carried Florida by a sizable margin and Ohio by a much smaller margin. Some citizens believed the exit polls, not the actual vote counts, and therefore concluded that the election system had been compromised or even that the election had been stolen. Postelection analyses were conducted to try to account for the discrepancies between the exit polls and the actual vote and to determine whether anything sinister had occurred. One study was conducted by the National Election Pool and its sponsors, the same group responsible for the exit polls in the first place. They (Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International 2005) criticized the media leaks, arguing that any partial, early results could be inherently misleading, particularly since the final adjustments to the data had not yet been made. They also acknowledged that the precincts they sampled in the exit polls were a bit too pro-Kerry. They suggested that Republicans were less likely to participate in the exit polls, thereby creating a misleading pro-Kerry bias, and they also cited some problems with the exit interviewers. Some critics did not accept these explanations and still wondered whether more systemic problems occurred in the conduct of the 2004 election. Traugott, Highton, and Brady (2005) present a concise summary of the controversy and a very helpful bibliography of key sources.

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Projecting election results for a state before that state's polls are closed raises concerns about the behavior of broadcast news organizations. Although there is some dispute about how late in the day exit polls must be taken to obtain a representative sample and make accurate projections (Busch and Lieske 1985), it is clear that if the polls close in a state at 7:30 p.m., exit polls could, in most cases, accurately predict the winner by late afternoon. But widespread reporting of such projections by the broadcast media could measurably depress turnout within a state. The television networks claim they are very careful not to make projections about a state until after its polls have closed, but a 1983 study by the League of Women Voters and the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate pointed to numerous instances in the 1982 elections when projections were broadcast while the polls were still open. In 2000, there were deliberate leaks of exit poll results while the polls were still open in some of the key, early primary states. During the general election, only the threat of lawsuits prevented certain media outlets from prematurely leaking exit poll results. Even some of the major television news anchors have become careless about revealing exit poll results for a state before that state has completed voting and all too often are heard speculating on election night that the early exit poll results suggest that it will be a good evening for a particular candidate. In 2006, the major television news anchors said that the exit polls showed that the concerns and motivations pushing voters on Election Day suggested a good Democratic evening once the votes were tallied. The anchors emphasized that they were not revealing anything about any specific contest until the polls were closed, but they certainly sent out strong signals while the polls were still open in many states that election night would be a good one for Democrats.

In 2016, an inaccurate exit poll conducted for the New York presidential primary on April 19 strongly influenced the CNN television coverage of the New York primary as well as *The New York Times* reporting the following day. As soon as the polls closed on Tuesday night, CNN declared Donald Trump the winner of the Republican primary. But based upon exit poll results, CNN said that the Democratic primary between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders was too close to call with the exit poll showing Clinton with a narrow 52 to 48 margin. Even as the actual election returns came in showing Clinton far ahead in the popular vote, CNN waited a long time before calling the election for Clinton, in part because of the misleading exit poll numbers. Clinton won the New York primary by a 58% to 42% margin, but *The New York Times* (national edition) front page headline the next day read "Trump Landslide Gives Crucial Lift in Delegate Lead" and the secondary headline read "Regains Control of Race for G.O.P.—Clinton and Sanders in Tight Race." Since when is a 16 point margin a tight race? The first paragraph of the page one *Times* story by Patrick Healy and Maggie Haberman stated that "Donald J. Trump wrested back control of the Republican presidential race on Tuesday night with a commanding

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victory in the New York primary, while Hillary Clinton was battling against the multitudes of young Democrats, white men and liberals who turned out for Senator Bernie Sanders." Clearly, the initial reporting on the Democratic primary was heavily influenced by the exit poll results and did not acknowledge the strength of the Clinton victory. Thus, this was a situation in which the media appropriately waited until after the polls were closed to report on the exit poll results. But they then continued to rely on the exit poll numbers even when the actual vote totals told a quite different story.

The opposition to exit polls has been fierce in many circles. Congress and state governments have sharply criticized exit polls, but legislative efforts to ban or restrict exit polling have largely come to naught. Newspaper columnist Mike Royko once urged readers to lie to exit poll interviewers, thereby undermining the usefulness of the entire enterprise. Some pollsters have themselves been critical of exit polls and early projections. Although Roper (1985) and others believe that exit polls have few, if any, effects on elections, they argue that their use should still be curtailed because most citizens believe that exit polls can influence election outcomes. Exit polls, they claim, cause citizens to lose confidence in the electoral process and become increasingly suspicious of the mass media. Morin (2004) welcomed the 2004 controversy, hoping that the experience of 2004 would make citizens more skeptical about early exit poll results and more aware that exit polls, like any other poll, have inherent problems and imperfections.

The controversy surrounding exit polls will likely continue to ebb and flow depending on their performance and their use and misuse. When controversy is high, there will be calls to regulate and restrict exit polls. The television networks argue strenuously that government-imposed limitations on the reporting of exit polls would be a form of censorship and a violation of their First Amendment rights. The news organizations also note that if the polls were open simultaneously for twenty-four hours in all fifty states, the problem of early projections would be resolved. State officials reject that option as too expensive and point out that the networks could still make premature projections for those states for which they had sufficient information. Many years ago, Broder (1984) proposed the Canadian solution: The networks could begin their election coverage by time zone, from east to west, beginning each regional broadcast just as polls in that region are closing. Thus, the networks might begin election coverage in the East at 8:00 p.m. EST, in the Midwest at 9:00 p.m. EST, in the mountain states at 10:00 p.m. EST, and on the Pacific Coast at 11:00 p.m. EST. But today, with so many media outlets and so many Internet-based ways to access election returns, such a proposal would provide little relief.

Consumers of exit polls should carefully evaluate the news reports throughout Election Day. Any news about patterns of voting among various groups is most likely based on the exit polls completed to that point. Consumers should ask themselves whether such reports might affect their

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likelihood of voting or their chosen candidate. They also should note the time of the announcement of any election projections. If the projection is made before the polls have closed, then it is based on exit polls and not on official election returns, which are not available until after the polls close. The next question is whether the projection is for a state contest or a national race. If the latter, consumers should note whether the polls are still open in some states. Finally, consumers should try to keep a mental list of the number of early projections that subsequently are contradicted by the actual vote totals.

It is unlikely that exit polls will ever be regulated except by the self-policing of the networks themselves. In the early days of exit polling, the television networks, aiming to beat the competition and to improve ratings, invested heavily in the technology of polling and election coverage. (The polls play a somewhat different role for newspapers, which are not in a competition to predict election outcomes on election night. Instead, newspapers use exit polls primarily to describe voting patterns and to explain why the election turned out as it did.) Beginning with the 1990 midterm elections, however, the competition was somewhat mitigated when ABC, NBC, CBS, and CNN decided to conduct one joint exit poll under the auspices of the Voter News Service (and, later, the National Election Pool). The major reason for the change was financial; exit polling is very expensive. But as Schneider (1989) has pointed out, when different exit polls have been conducted for the same election, the results have differed; multiple polls enabled investigators to compare the results and decide which were more likely on target. This cannot happen when there is only one exit poll consortium.

Push Polls

Push polling gained notoriety in the 1996 elections, even though the practice had been around for years, particularly in U.S. House races and in some state and local contests. As push polling has become more common, the American Association for Public Opinion Research and the National Council on Public Polls have condemned the practice. AAPOR (2007) describes push polling as

> an insidious form of negative campaigning, disguised as a political poll. "Push polls" are not surveys at all, but rather unethical political telemarketing—telephone calls disguised as research that aim to persuade large numbers of voters and affect election outcomes, rather than measure opinions.

The National Council on Public Polls (1995) further explains the difference between legitimate political polls and push polls:

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> [Legitimate political polls] use samples representative of all voters. "Push Polls" use telephone banks to canvass large numbers of voters. Legitimate polls may seek out weaknesses of candidates and attempt to ascertain the impact on voters of knowledge of these weaknesses, as well as issues and other facets of a political campaign. "Push Polls" attack selected candidates. The intent of legitimate polls in each case is research; a sample is interviewed, not a canvass, and the survey is not designed to deceive. . . . The results of "Push Polls" should never be reported by the media, but the use of such polls by a candidate may, of course, be a legitimate news story.

In 1996, a push poll was used in a Republican congressional primary in Texas (Clymer 1996). Representative Greg Laughlin was the preferred choice of the Republican Congressional Committee, which financed a push poll designed to hurt the other two contenders, Ron Paul and Jim Deats. About 30,000 calls were made. If respondents said they preferred Ron Paul, they were asked if they would still support him if they knew that Paul supported legalization of drugs, pornography, and prostitution. Likewise, if respondents said they favored Deats, they were asked how strong their support was, given his campaign debt of $200,000 and four previous unsuccessful runs for office. The information provided to respondents was misleading and designed to push them away from Paul and Deats and toward Laughlin. During the 2000 presidential primaries, a major controversy emerged in the South Carolina Republican primary when the McCain campaign accused the Bush team of engaging in massive push polling that included the following question: "Would you be more or less likely to vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?" The Bush campaign denied the charge, pointing out that the thousands of phone calls being made were simply advocacy calling, not done under the guise of a poll. The intent, the Bush camp said, was to disseminate negative information about Sen. John McCain to South Carolina voters.

Push polling was common in the 2006, 2008, and 2009 elections, often relying on automated calling rather than live callers. For example, in Maryland, voters received automated calls sponsored by a conservative group, asking whom they supported in the race for U.S. Senate: Republican Michael Steele or Democrat Benjamin Cardin (Marimow 2006). Respondents were then asked whether medical research should be done on unborn babies. If they said no, they next heard on the phone: "Fact: Ben Cardin voted to allow stem cell research to be done on unborn babies. Fact: Michael Steele opposes any research that destroys human life." The same conservative group (Common Sense Ohio) was active in push polling in other key U.S. Senate contests in Ohio, Tennessee, Montana, and Missouri and in an antiabortion referendum in South Dakota (Drew 2006). Hundreds

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of thousands of these calls were made. And in the Ohio gubernatorial contest in 2006, the campaign of Republican candidate Ken Blackwell used push polling to suggest that his opponent was soft on sexual abuse of children (Hallett 2006).

In 2007, in the lead-up to the Iowa Republican precinct caucuses, a group supporting Mike Huckabee for the Republican presidential nomination organized telephone calls against three Huckabee opponents: Fred Thompson, John McCain, and Rudy Giuliani (J. Martin 2007). After beginning with some relatively innocuous questions, the poll then presented negative information about Thompson, McCain, and Giuliani. For example, for Giuliani, respondents were told that he was pro-abortion, supported civil unions, and that his police chief and business partner had been indicted on various charges. Mitt Romney was also the target of push polls in the months prior to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary (Elliott 2007; Lightman 2007). The calls would ask whether the fact that Romney was a Mormon, that Mormons consider the Book of Mormon to be superior to the Bible, that Romney received military deferments when he served as a Mormon missionary, and that none of his five sons served in the military made respondents more or less favorable to Mitt Romney. During the general election in 2008, Jewish voters in Florida and elsewhere were asked whether they would be more or less likely to vote for Barack Obama if they knew he had donated money to the Palestine Liberation Organization, had met with Hamas leaders, and belonged to a church that had made anti-Semitic statements (Kennedy 2008). As a final example, the 2009 campaign to reelect Michael Bloomberg as mayor of New York City was accused of conducting push polling against a potential Bloomberg opponent, U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner (Hernandez 2009). The interview began with appropriate questions, but then respondents were asked whether their views of Mr. Weiner would be changed if they knew that he had missed votes in Congress, had difficulty keeping staff, and accepted campaign contributions from foreign fashion models.

How can citizens protect themselves from push polls? The American Association of Political Consultants, another organization that has denounced push polling, has provided some advice for spotting such polls. First, reputable polling begins by providing the name of the sponsor of the research or the organization conducting the research; push polls typically do not provide that information. Second, legitimate telephone surveys usually last at least five minutes and often much longer; the typical push poll is less than a minute in duration. A third sign of a push poll, more apparent to news reporters than the average citizen, is the number of calls

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made in a particular election contest. The fact that thousands and thousands of calls have been made to citizens about a particular race is a clear sign that push polling is under way because most genuine polls require fewer than a thousand respondents. Indeed, when the news media hear of such an activity, they should publicize and condemn it. And citizens who believe they have been called as part of a push poll might tip off their local media in the hope that a news organization will investigate and expose the situation. Because push polling is more likely to be used in less visible, lower level elections, where media scrutiny is often less extensive, it is important that citizens be particularly vigilant in those circumstances. But as the previous examples show, push polling occurs even in the more visible presidential selection process.

Uses of Polls by Candidates

Candidates use polls to test the political waters in a variety of ways. Prospective candidates might commission a private poll and also examine public polls to assess their chances. How they assess the results can steer their expectations and actions. For example, bad poll news might lead to a decision not to seek office. In 1986, New Yorker Geraldine Ferraro decided not to run for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Republican senator Alphonse D'Amato in part because poll results showed her trailing substantially. A party organization with the financial resources to conduct polls and to provide other election services may use that capability to recruit candidates. In 2006, late polls sponsored by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) identified some U.S. House contests in which the Democratic challenger was running surprisingly well against the heavily favored Republican incumbent. The DCCC then channeled funds to those contests and wound up gaining some unexpected victories. In 2010, the DCCC cut off funding to some Democratic incumbents when polls showed them losing and transferred the money to other contests where Democratic prospects were more promising.

Sometimes, candidates use positive poll results to generate campaign contributions or to deter contributions to their opponents. In 1985, Idaho's Democratic governor, John Evans, sent the results of a poll he had conducted to many political action committees (PACs) and potential contributors. The poll showed Evans in a virtual tie with the state's Republican U.S. senator, Steve Symms, in a trial heat for Symms's Senate seat. Evans's action was clearly a signal to contributors that he had a good chance of unseating Symms in the 1986 election and therefore was worthy of their donations (Rothenberg 1985, 11). Evans ultimately lost by a narrow margin.

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Often, when published polls show a candidate running poorly, the candidate may try to minimize the potential damage to fund-raising and volunteers' morale by attacking the credibility and relevance of the poll. "The only poll that counts is the poll taken on Election Day," the candidate might argue, citing examples of the polls' having been wrong in the past. In a systematic analysis of the reactions of the 1992 Bush campaign to negative poll results, Bauman and Herbst (1994) found three dominant responses. First was the (often valid) assertion that it was too early to give much credence to poll results. Second was an attack on the pollsters themselves and the journalists who reported the polls. Finally, the campaign tried to counter the results of published polls with the results of its own private polls. In other instances, attacks on a poll may be more method related, challenging the sample, question wording, or question context.

Whatever the merits of these criticisms, it is clear that a candidate "harmed" by polls has a strong incentive to cast doubt on their credibility so that his or her campaign is taken seriously. If a campaign is not taken seriously, it will have difficulty raising money and attracting other resources, such as free media coverage. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Strickland campaign for governor of Ohio in 2010 released its own internal polling data in a very forthcoming fashion in order to counter the potential effects of some public polls showing a much larger deficit than was the case.

There are times when candidates allow their campaigns to be too poll-driven. When asked why a campaign did not utilize a particular messaging strategy, the campaign sometimes replies that they tested that message or theme and found that it did not move the poll numbers. This is certainly a correct response in some cases. But in other situations, it will not be. Testing a message or theme in a poll is not the same thing as having a major media buy or an ambitious earned-media strategy and then assessing whether the poll numbers moved. Items in a public opinion survey cannot fully capture the actual political and media context and impact of a real-world campaign.

Sometimes, candidates deliberately manipulate aspects of their campaign or the polling process to generate poll results that will advance their candidacies. For example, in the four-way contest for the Republican nomination for governor of Ohio in 1982, one of the candidates, Seth Taft, scheduled his early television advertising to go on the air before the Ohio Republican Party conducted a statewide poll assessing the standing of the candidates. The poll showed Taft running first, thereby enhancing his credibility. Undoubtedly, his famous last name and the skillful timing of his commercials gave Taft an early advantage in the polls, but he eventually lost

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the primary. To demonstrate greater electoral strength than they actually have, candidates often schedule television commercials and mailings in conjunction with party- and media-sponsored polls.

Candidates and campaign managers are also very skillful in selectively leaking information from in-house, private polls. Sometimes in-house polls are deliberately designed to generate the desired results. For example, before asking a trial heat question about the contenders, pollsters might ask a series of issue questions or candidate qualification items that will predispose the respondent to support one candidate over another. But in leaking the results of the trial heat item to the media, the campaign will not include information about the questions that preceded it. A candidate can also try to control poll results through sample selection. For example, if a candidate is thought to be more popular among women than men, interviewing might be conducted mainly during the day to obtain a more female sample. When the results of the poll are leaked, however, the pollsters will not mention the gender composition of the sample, thereby inflating the standing of the candidate.

Silver (2012) points out that campaigns selectively leak their own internal polls that show their candidate running well and are especially likely to do this if independent external polls are showing the opposite. Obviously, campaigns try to create a positive news spin about their candidates' prospects. And to accomplish this, they may manipulate features of their own internal polls. But Silver notes that even when campaigns do not manipulate their own internal polls, these polls may still present too optimistic a picture of their candidates' chances. Silver notes that in 2012, the Romney campaign's internal polling in seven key states had Obama ahead by an average margin of 1 percent. But Obama actually won all seven states by an average margin of 6 percent. That is, the Romney campaign's own internal polls were biased in favor of Romney, and as Silver observes, perhaps campaigns themselves are overly optimistic, thereby "fooling themselves."

Voters and reporters should be wary of such selective leaking. One tip-off is refusal by a campaign to reveal additional information about a poll, such as question wording and question order. Although this kind of manipulation is not widespread, many campaigns use whatever tactics they believe will work because the objective of most campaigns is to win the election. "Good" poll results—whether valid or not—can make fund-raising easier, generate more serious media coverage, and invigorate the campaign team and volunteers. Consumers can only endeavor to exercise good judgment in evaluating election poll results and hope that reporters and other journalists will not be easily victimized by manipulative campaigns.

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Polls in the Presidential Selection Process

Polls pervade all stages of the presidential selection process. During the primary season, media polls in key states are common, as are national polls measuring the presidential preferences of Democrats and Republicans throughout the nation. During the general-election campaign, the major news organizations and the campaigns themselves regularly conduct polls. When a major campaign event occurs, such as a televised debate among presidential contenders, a slew of polls follows, immediately assessing the effect of the event.

One result of the ubiquity of polls in presidential campaigns is the increasing prominence of pollsters. Over the past four decades, individual pollsters such as Pat Caddell, Richard Wirthlin, and Stanley Greenberg achieved celebrity status during the Carter, Reagan, and Clinton campaigns. Today, pollsters are part of individual candidates' core strategy groups that decide on themes and tactics, media advertising, public speaking schedules, and other key aspects of the campaign.

Polls do much more than simply reflect the current standings of the candidates in the presidential contest. The polls and the reporting of them shape the very course of the campaign. They also have been instrumental in campaign fund-raising, although their impact has lessened in that area. Since 1976, presidential campaigns in the general election can be publicly funded, leaving major-party nominees free from worry that poor poll performance will cut off the flow of money to their campaigns. In recent elections, presidential candidates have rejected public funding, since it places severe restrictions on the amount of money that can be spent to win the election. In 1968, however, many Democrats complained that early polls showing Hubert Humphrey losing the election had badly hindered fund-raising, so when it became clear near the end of the campaign that Humphrey had a chance to win, the money available for the final push was inadequate. In contrast to the general election, during the primary season, eligible candidates received only partial public funding, and the amount of public matching money they received depended on their ability to attract private financial support. Today, bad poll results, as well as poor primary and caucus showings, may deter potential donors, as well as independent groups, from supporting a campaign that appears to be failing.

The Caucus and Primary Season

The combined effect of polls and media coverage of polls is particularly critical during the caucus and primary season for at least two reasons. First, many candidates may seek a party's presidential nomination. In 1988, for example, six Republicans and seven Democrats sought party nominations.

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In the lead-up to the 2016 nominations, in which there was no incumbent president seeking reelection, there was a major difference between the political parties in the number of candidates seeking their respective nominations. For the Democrats, there were only four candidates, but for the GOP, there was a huge field of seventeen aspirants. Unable to cover all of the GOP candidates, the news media and television stations hosting the Republican debates gave preferred treatment to the candidates performing better in the polls, as discussed in Chapter 1. And in terms of free or "earned" media, some estimates indicate that through February 2016, Donald Trump had received almost $2 billion of free media coverage, far more than any other Republican or Democratic candidate, including Hillary Clinton (Confessore and Yourish 2016). While much of Trump's free coverage was not positive, it was clear he was being rewarded not only for his strong standing in the polls, but also for the great theater and controversy he provided for the media. Thus, while the media tend to focus on viable candidates, where viability is typically determined by performance in the polls and the amount of campaign funds raised, the Trump candidacy demonstrated the importance of another criterion: controversy.

Second, the caucuses and primaries are a sequence of elections in which news media coverage of the outcome in just one state can dramatically affect later polls and primaries. For example, in 1984, John Glenn's campaign conducted a poll in New Hampshire about one week before that state's primary. The actual interviewing was conducted around the time of the Iowa precinct caucuses, in which Glenn did much worse than expected. The media coverage of the Iowa results stressed how badly the Glenn campaign was hurt there. Glenn's New Hampshire survey then showed that interviews completed before the reports of his poor finish in Iowa had him running much stronger in New Hampshire than did interviews completed after the reports of the Iowa results. The combined effect of media coverage and the polls is particularly significant in Iowa and New Hampshire, the states in which the formal process of selecting delegates to the parties' national nominating conventions begins. The "winners" in Iowa and New Hampshire almost invariably enjoy a sizable gain in support in the national polls because of the positive and extensive media coverage they receive.

The presidential primary season is something of a sequential, psychological game. In it, the perception that a candidate is running strong, as indicated by good poll results, makes it easier for the campaign to attract money, volunteers, and media coverage; bad poll results have the opposite effect. But strong performance in the polls is itself a function of the amount and content of media coverage that a candidate receives. That is why Iowa and New Hampshire are so critical. Because they are small states in which both a personal and a media campaign can be conducted, they enable a relatively unknown or underdog candidate—such as Jimmy Carter in

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1976, Gary Hart in 1984, Bill Clinton in 1992, John McCain in 2000, or John Edwards in 2004—to do better than expected and thus receive substantial media coverage. The coverage can move a candidate higher in the public opinion polls, which, in turn, enhances the candidate's media coverage and credibility.

During the primary season, candidates appeal for support on the grounds that they are more electable than their opponents, as demonstrated by the polls. Probably the best examples of this phenomenon occurred in 1976 and 1968. In 1976, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan were locked in a tight battle for the Republican presidential nomination; the winner would most likely face former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter in the general election. The Ford campaign conceded the South to Carter no matter who won the GOP nomination but argued, citing public opinion polls, that Ford was much the stronger candidate to run against Carter nationwide (Phillips 1976). In 1968, Nelson Rockefeller's campaign to win the GOP nomination also depended heavily on the public opinion polls because Rockefeller knew he would have great difficulty winning presidential primaries and caucuses. Rockefeller challenged Richard Nixon, the front-runner, to cosponsor fifty state polls to see which candidate was the strongest. He also commissioned and released polls of states whose electoral votes were key that showed him running better than Nixon against Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey (Crossley and Crossley 1969, 7). Rockefeller hoped to sway Republican delegates to his cause with the argument that he was the strongest candidate the party could offer. More recently, John Kerry's strong first-place finish in the Iowa precinct caucuses in 2004, in conjunction with the attendant media coverage and national polls, earned him the title of most electable Democrat. That perception of electability, fueled in part by the polls, facilitated Kerry's path to the Democratic nomination.

Presidential Debates and the General Election

The interaction between poll results and media coverage is well illustrated by the treatment of the presidential and vice-presidential debates before the general election. Often, polls taken immediately after a debate produce very different results than ones taken a few days later. The difference is attributable to the dominant media message in the interim. For example, in the Ford-Carter debate in 1976, President Ford mistakenly asserted that Eastern Europe was not under the domination of the Soviet Union, when, in fact, at the time, Soviet troops were stationed in Poland, and the Polish government, among others in the region, was following the dictates of Moscow. Telephone polls immediately after the debate showed Carter

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winning but only by a narrow margin. When Ford received negative media coverage after the debate for his mistake, his campaign officials did not display much skill at putting the matter to rest. As a result, Carter's narrow margin burgeoned in the follow-up polls, which showed that Americans overwhelmingly viewed him as the winner of the debate.

"Winning" a debate may be a function less of a candidate's actual performance than of the media's coverage and interpretation of that performance. That is why the call-in poll that the ABC News organization sponsored after the Carter-Reagan debate in 1980 was particularly offensive. ABC News invited its viewers to call one of two numbers to indicate whether they thought Reagan or Carter had won; the call cost fifty cents. Despite the self-selection and economic biases inherent in this procedure and the technical difficulty many citizens experienced in trying to complete their calls, ABC News announced that Reagan had won the debate by a two-to-one margin over Carter. Ideally, Americans should have dismissed this instant poll as foolish and unsound. Unfortunately, because it was the first large-scale reaction to the debate to be publicized, the poll and ABC's reporting of it shaped subsequent perceptions of who won the debate. After the first Bush-Gore presidential debate in 2000, scientific polls generally showed Gore to be the victor, albeit by a small margin. Many Internet and radio call-in polls, however, characterized by self-selected and unrepresentative samples, showed Bush as the big winner. Fortunately, when the news media discussed the debate polls, they focused on the scientific ones. Broadcasters were criticized, however, for their reliance on instant and overnight polls.

As polling has become an integral part of media coverage of major campaign events, such as convention speeches and presidential debates, news organizations have increasingly incorporated overnight and instant polls into their coverage. The NCPP (2000), however, has urged caution:

> One issue where news values and good polling methods clash is the media's appetite for "instant" polls which provide an immediate reaction to dramatic events. . . .
>
> A key question for poll watchers, and the media who report polls, should always be *"How many days was the survey in the field?"* In general, the quality of the sample improves the longer the survey is in the field. . . .
>
> All surveys fail to interview many people . . . because they are on vacation, on a business trip, visiting, shopping, eating out or just too busy to take the call. That is why the most reliable telephone surveys make three, four or more calls, on different days, to try to complete an interview. Obviously, this is not possible for polls that are conducted overnight or over a few hours, and their response rates are much lower.

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> Given the very real possibility that those who are not interviewed, because they are not available, have even slightly different opinions than those who are interviewed, overnight polls, with their very low response rates, are much more likely to have substantial biases than polls with multiple call-backs over several days.

Polls also play a big role in determining which candidates are allowed to participate in presidential candidates' debates. In 1980, the League of Women Voters, the sponsor of the debate, decided to invite candidates whose support in public opinion surveys was more than 15 percent. The real issue at the time was whether independent candidate John Anderson would meet the 15 percent test. In 1996, unlike 1980, all independent and minor-party candidates were excluded from the debates. Ross Perot and other candidates asked the courts to overturn the decision but to no avail. The decision had been made by the Commission on Presidential Debates, a ten-person body of five Republicans and five Democrats, which determined the debates' format and who would participate. The Democratic and Republican nominees (Clinton and Dole) were automatically included, but the candidates of other parties had to demonstrate that they had a realistic chance of being elected president to be invited to participate. That is, they had to show evidence of a national organization, national newsworthiness, and national enthusiasm for their candidacies (Hernandez 1995). One indicator of national enthusiasm was a candidate's standing in the public opinion polls. The commission, after judging that Ross Perot's low standing in the polls, along with other evidence, made it unlikely that he could win, excluded him from the debates.

Presidential debates should not be cluttered with numbers of mostly frivolous candidates, but was the decision to exclude Perot appropriate? After all, Perot was on the ballot in all fifty states, he had received 19 percent of the popular vote in 1992, and he had more than $20 million in public funding to finance his 1996 campaign. Although the polls the commission used to exclude Perot showed him with the voting support of only about 5 percent of the American people, other polls showed that more than 70 percent of Americans wanted Perot included in the debates. Moreover, although Perot's 5 percent in the polls at the time the commission made its decision in 1996 was close to his support level at a comparable point in the 1992 election campaign, he ultimately took almost a fifth of the vote in 1992. As Perot learned, using poll standing to exclude a candidate from the presidential debates creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a candidate is showing poorly in the polls, excluding that candidate from the most visible event of the presidential campaign can only further erode that candidate's support as the campaign moves into its critical final weeks.

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A similar situation occurred in 2000 when the presidential debate commission again decided to use poll standing as one criterion for determining who could participate in the presidential debates. The commission chose a floor of 15 percent in a set of polls conducted shortly after Labor Day. The two most prominent minor-party candidates—Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan—could not meet that standard and thus were excluded. This situation was particularly frustrating to Buchanan who, as the nominee of the Reform Party, had received $12 million in public funding based on the Reform Party's performance in the 1996 election.

When and Why Election Predictions Are Wrong

The vast majority of polls are on target. Nevertheless, pollsters have made some notorious mistakes, such as in the *Literary Digest* poll of 1936 (discussed in Chapter 4) and the 1948 presidential election polls that indicated that Republican Thomas Dewey would beat Democrat Harry Truman. The bad call in 1948 is widely attributed to the quota method of sampling that the polls employed and, more importantly, to the fact that polling stopped too far in advance of the election and therefore did not reflect the movement of many Democratic defectors back to Truman. In fact, the last polls showed Dewey with only a five-point lead over Truman, and the trend had been one of a declining Dewey advantage.

National polls have been off target in other important races. In 1980, for example, they failed to predict the magnitude of Reagan's victory. Most polls showed a very tight race, but Reagan beat Carter by ten percentage points. Again, the poor predictions were attributed to the fact that many polls did not continue right through to the end of the campaign and thus did not capture the last-minute surge to Reagan by the undecideds and independents. The state-level polls in 1980 were far more accurate in predicting a sizable Reagan victory.

In 1992, the general-election presidential polls were quite accurate overall, although critics expressed concerns about the deluge of sometimes conflicting polls and the way the news media reported them. One set of criticisms focused on the tracking polls that Gallup conducted toward the end of the campaign. Those polls, which received substantial media attention (Traugott 1992), generated concerns about the selection of respondents, the method by which undecided voters were allocated to candidates, and, most importantly, a shift in poll analysis from registered voters to likely voters, which created confusion among the media and the public as to how much the gap between Clinton and Bush had actually narrowed.

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In 1996, the preelection polls correctly predicted that Clinton would be reelected, but some of them substantially overestimated his margin of victory. Among polls seeking to predict the makeup of the House of Representatives, even the ones conducted just before the election yielded widely varying estimates, with some predicting a sizable Democratic victory, others a smaller Democratic win, and still others a narrow GOP victory. Political scientist Everett Carll Ladd (1996) described 1996 as a very bad year for pollsters—"an American Waterloo." Ladd criticized the polls for overstating Clinton's margins and blamed the polls and the news media for contributing to the low voter turnout by dampening interest in the outcome with their predictions of a major Clinton win. Pollsters defended the polls; Newport (1997) and Morin (1997a) found the 1996 polls generally on target.

Perhaps the real problem with election polls is not their accuracy but how they are reported. Too many polls dominate news coverage of the election and contribute to the horse race mentality. Small changes in poll standing often are given too much attention, becoming the subject of breathless news stories when there really is no news. Poll standing, rather than issue stances, often drives coverage of candidates. In the meantime, the subtleties of poll interpretation frequently are lost, particularly those related to the polls' methodological aspects. And news organizations tend to focus on their own polls and ignore those of the competition.

The performance of the polls in 2000 was generally good, with most of the national polls converging toward the end of the campaign to show a very close contest between Bush and Gore. Even so, of eighteen national preelection polls conducted right at the end of the campaign, thirteen indicated a Bush lead, three estimated a tie, and only two had Gore ahead. Gore received 48.6 percent of the popular vote, compared with 48.3 percent for Bush (Traugott 2001). And some of the polls that had Bush ahead showed him with a lead over Gore of 5 to 7 percent. Although the national polls generally performed well in 2000, Rademacher and Smith (2001) found that seventy-nine state-level telephone polls were, on average, not as accurate. Probably the worst experience for the pollsters in 2000 (other than the Florida fiasco) was the New Hampshire Republican primary, in which John McCain scored a landslide victory over George W. Bush when most polls were showing a much closer contest. Part of the problem for pollsters in New Hampshire was that independents could vote in either party's primary, and many of them voted for McCain in the GOP primary. Moreover, as Smith and Hubbard (2000) note, the turnout among the "undeclared" or independents was much higher than normal in 2000.

The performance of the final national preelection polls in 2004 was very good. Traugott (2005) found that most poll estimates were close to the

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actual results, with thirteen polls showing Bush ahead, five for Kerry, and two ties. Many of the final state polls were also quite accurate, particularly in battleground states in the industrial Midwest and Great Lakes region. One point to keep in mind is that when the actual election outcome is very close, say 51 percent Republican to 49 percent Democratic, a poll that indicates a 49 percent Republican to 51 percent Democratic outcome may be "wrong," but it is certainly very accurate.

In 2008, the preeelction polls were once again generally on target. An NCPP analysis (2008) showed that the nineteen national presidential polls reported late in the campaign came very close to the actual election outcome. Likewise, the much larger number of state-level polls also performed well, although here, there was greater variation in the accuracy of the predictions. Keeter et al. (2009) generally came to the same conclusions about the 2008 national and state preelection polls, although they delved more deeply into the kinds of samples utilized by telephone polls—landline-only versus landline-and-cell samples—and also examined in greater detail the performance of the polls in battleground states that were key to the presidential outcome. Again, their general conclusion was that the polls performed well. The major embarrassment that the polls endured in 2008 was their inaccurate prediction in the New Hampshire Democratic primary. All of the preelection polls mistakenly predicted an Obama victory over Hillary Clinton, some by a double-digit margin, when, in fact, Clinton won New Hampshire by about three percentage points. These incorrect predictions were described by many as one of polling's worst modern-day failures, and many pollsters and analysts tried to find a convincing explanation. Many of the usual suspects were brought up, including very last-minute changes that the polls could not capture, hidden votes for Clinton and/or against Obama, the proportion of independents who chose to vote in the Democratic versus the Republican primary, and the unpredictability of the good citizens of New Hampshire. (See Dilanian [2008], Frankovic [2008], Kohut [2008], and Zogby [2008] for insights and speculation into what went wrong.) It should be noted that these same polls did a fine job predicting the outcome of the New Hampshire Republican primary.

In 2012, state and national polls conducted shortly before the November election generally did a good job predicting the presidential election results as well as the outcomes for governor and U.S. Senate in those states that had such contests on the ballot that year. For the presidential contest, the National Council on Public Polls reported that of twenty-five national polls conducted in the week prior to the election, sixteen showed Obama ahead, seven showed an exact tie, and two had Romney ahead, one of which was the Gallup poll that we will discuss later. The polls' estimates for the Obama share of the vote ranged from

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45 to 54 percent; Obama received 51.1 percent of the popular vote. For Romney, the polls' range was 43 to 49 percent; Romney won 47.2 percent of the popular vote. Specific state polls on the presidential contest were generally on target, with Internet polls performing slightly better than telephone polls with live interviewers. These were Internet polls in which respondents were selected from a previously recruited panel of citizens; they were not Internet surveys in which anyone could simply opt in to participate in the poll.

Silver (2012) and Panagopoulus (2013) reached conclusions similar to the NCPP (2013) on the performance of the 2012 polls. In Panagopoulus's analysis of twenty-eight national polls, twenty-six overestimated Romney's support while two overstated Obama's strength. But only two polls—YouGov and Gallup—had a significant pro-Republican bias, due in part to a flawed turnout model. Silver observed that some of the most accurate polls were online surveys with samples selected from panels, such as Google Consumer Survey and Ipsos. Silver was particularly critical of the live-interviewer telephone surveys conducted by Gallup. In late October of 2012, Gallup had Romney ahead of Obama by about 6 percent among likely voters, a result highly discrepant from other polls, although the final Gallup estimate had Romney up by only 1 percent. The uproar that surrounded the Gallup results led the Gallup Organization to do an in-house analysis of what went wrong. Their findings focused on four problems (Blumenthal and Edwards-Levy 2013; Clement 2013; Connelly and Thee-Brenan 2013). One problem was that the seven-question model that Gallup had used in the past to identify likely voters did not work well in 2012. For example, a key question in determining likely voters is how much thought they had given to the election. If they had not given much thought, they would not be in the likely voter pool. In 2012, there were a number of Obama voters who were not included in the likely voter pool because they said they had not given much thought to the election. Another problem was the undersampling of regions of the country that tended to be more Democratic. A third problem was the new way that Gallup selected the landline component of its dual-frame sample. And finally, because of the way Gallup surveys queried respondents about their race (and the subsequent weighting that was done), the preelection polls overrepresented whites and underrepresented African Americans and Hispanics, with obvious consequences for poll accuracy given the racial and ethnic divisions in presidential vote preferences.

The accuracy of predictions depends on many factors. The rest of this section examines four of them: the timing of preelection polls, the treatment of undecided voters, the estimation of voter turnout, and the changing political and economic climate.

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Timing of Polls

The closer to the election a preelection poll is conducted, the more accurate its results are likely to be (Felson and Sudman 1975). Late polls can capture the effects of last-minute events and campaign activities that may influence outcomes. By contrast, early polls primarily reflect name recognition and perceptions of incumbents' performance. When voters initially have little information about the candidates, their attitudes are highly likely to change once they acquire some new information about the contenders. For that reason, presidential primary polls often are less accurate than the general-election polls. In the primaries, especially the early ones with a large field of candidates, information levels are low, and voters' commitments to candidates are weak.

In a comprehensive analysis of the factors affecting the accuracy of preelection polls, Crespi (1988) found that the most important factor was how close to Election Day the preelection poll was conducted. The next-most-important factor was margin of victory and then either turnout or whether the election was a primary. These findings suggest that polls would be more accurate if they did a better job of identifying likely voters and monitoring trends in voters' preferences in the latter stages of a campaign. This suggestion is directly relevant to the failure of the polls to predict George H. W. Bush's comfortable win in the 1988 New Hampshire Republican primary. Why were most of the polls so wrong? The Gallup Organization explained that it stopped polling too early (by 4 p.m. on the Sunday before the Tuesday election) and therefore did not capture late-breaking developments (Grove 1988a). The one poll that correctly predicted Bush's victory was the CBS survey, which involved a tracking poll on the Sunday and Monday before the election (Morin 1988a) and thus reinforces Crespi's advice to poll as close to the election as possible. Clearly, if there is a late-breaking development in a campaign, such as an international crisis or a revelation about scandalous behavior, only polls conducted after those events can capture their impact on citizens' vote choices. Lau's (1994) analysis of the accuracy of the 1992 presidential polls found that polls conducted over multiple days were more accurate than overnight polls. Lau also found that tracking polls were more accurate than standard polls and that polls that interviewed on both weekdays and weekends were more accurate than weekday-only polls.

Treatment of Undecided Voters

When respondents claim to be undecided, they can mean different things. Some genuinely cannot choose among the candidates because they do not have enough balanced information to make a choice, but that is probably

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unusual. Others may know very little about one or more of the candidates and therefore be unwilling to make a choice. On the other hand, "undecided" may be a safe answer for those who do not want to reveal their election choices to the interviewer.

Evidence for this third possibility comes via the secret-ballot technique that the Gallup Organization has long used. In this procedure, respondents are given a ballot by the interviewer, asked to mark their choices, and then requested to drop the folded ballot into a box. Perry (1979) points out that this approach yields an undecided rate that is about one-third to one-fourth as large as that obtained when respondents are asked their vote preference by means of a standard survey item. (Note that the secret-ballot technique can only be used with personal interviews.)

Pollsters can simply ignore undecided respondents and tabulate results only for those who have already made up their minds, but that is a highly flawed procedure if the undecideds differ in major ways from the decideds. Another way of handling the undecideds is to report their numbers but then to assume that they will split in the same way that the decideds already have. Thus, if 60 percent of decideds vote Democratic, 60 percent of the undecideds will be allocated to the Democratic Party. This is probably a reasonable rule when both candidates are equally well known and when there is no reason to suspect that anything unusual is going on among the undecideds.

When one candidate is well known, and the other is not, however, the treatment of the undecideds is more problematic. In a race between a well-known, longtime incumbent and a relatively unknown challenger, an undecided vote can reflect poorly on the incumbent. In 1978, Ohio state representative Charles Kurfess challenged incumbent governor James Rhodes for the GOP gubernatorial nomination. Rhodes had already served three, four-year terms and was seeking a fourth; he was the well-known warhorse of the Ohio Republican Party. The benchmark survey conducted for the Kurfess campaign showed that respondents favored Rhodes over Kurfess by 66 percent to 6 percent, with 28 percent undecided. The final election results were 67 percent to 33 percent in favor of Rhodes. Without panel data, it is impossible to conclude definitively that most of the undecideds moved to support Kurfess, but it seems plausible in this case that the undecided vote was actually a negative comment on the incumbent. In response to another question, the undecideds overwhelmingly preferred a new candidate for governor.

The behavior of undecided voters also partially accounts for the failure of preelection polls to mirror closely the outcomes of two prominent contests in 1989—the races for mayor of New York City and for governor of Virginia. Although polls accurately predicted the winners—David Dinkins

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in New York and Douglas Wilder in Virginia—the poll estimates of their margins of victory were much too high. Wilder won in Virginia by less than 1 percent, whereas the preelection polls were indicating a double-digit margin. In New York, Dinkins won by about 2 percent, even though the polls had shown him between fourteen and twenty-one points ahead (Balz 1989). The contests received a lot of media coverage because both Dinkins and Wilder would be the first black Americans elected to their respective positions. If, as many pollsters believe, whites who are undecided in a contest between a black and a white candidate vote heavily for the white candidate, then one reason for the polling error in the Dinkins and Wilder contests was the behavior of the heavily white undecided voters. Other factors contributing to the poll discrepancies in the Dinkins and Wilder victories were race-of-interviewer effects, turnout effects, and last-minute changes in voter preferences. The fact remains, however, that some white voters gave an "undecided" response to an interviewer querying on a black-versus-white contest even though they may have already decided to support the white candidate.

Estimating Turnout in Elections

Probably the most difficult task pollsters face is estimating which of their respondents will actually vote. If the preferences of voters and nonvoters were identical, that task would not be a problem. But often, there are marked differences between the two groups In the 2010 midterm elections, correctly estimating turnout for Democrats and Republicans was critical to generating accurate election predictions. Most pollsters observed an enthusiasm gap: Republicans were more likely to vote than Democrats and were also firmer in their vote choices. Indeed, in many polls that reported their results based on the entire sample of registered voters and also on the subset of likely voters, there were sharp differences between the predicted outcomes. For example, in its October 18, 2010, report, Gallup found that Republicans led Democrats among registered voters by five percentage points on the generic congressional ballot, an advantage that swelled to eleven and seventeen points among likely voters, depending on turnout. A series of CNN polls on U.S. Senate races also showed Democrats doing better among registered voters than among likely voters. In Colorado, Republican Ken Buck led Democrat Michael Bennet by five points among likely voters but trailed by three points with registered voters. In Wisconsin, Republican Ron Johnson led Democrat Russ Feingold by six points among likely voters but lagged by two points with registered voters. And in Pennsylvania, Republican Pat Toomey led Democrat Joe Sestak by five points among likely voters, but the two candidates were tied among registered voters.

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Identifying the likely voters has become even more challenging with the advent of early voting in many states. One might argue that early voting would not change turnout models if the people who did vote early were mainly citizens who otherwise would have voted on Election Day. But what if early voting expands the electorate, perhaps because of major mobilization efforts and ground games? For example, Chris Redfern, the chair of the Ohio Democratic Party in 2010, said that with early voting, he now had thirty-five days rather than the thirteen hours the polls were open on Election Day to stimulate Democratic voters to turn out. Although the Democrats lost all the statewide offices in Ohio in 2010, Redfern believed that the race for governor could not have been as close as it was without early voting.

Over the years, pollsters have used a variety of means to predict whether a person will vote. Utilizing an index, the Gallup Organization has identified a subsample of likely voters from the overall sample (Perry 1979, 320–321). Among the items in the index are the respondents' stated intention to vote, registration status, reported frequency of past voting, awareness of where to vote, interest in politics in general, interest in the particular election, and intensity of candidate preference. Thus, in Gallup's final survey for the presidential election in 1976, when all respondents were considered, Carter led Ford 48 percent to 43 percent; Eugene McCarthy and others received 4 percent; and undecideds and those who refused to participate amounted to 5 percent. But when the survey considered only likely voters, Carter led 48 percent to 46 percent; the other candidates received 2 percent; and undecideds or those refusing to respond to the poll made up 4 percent. Morin (2001b) notes that the index that the Gallup Organization used to identify likely voters appears to work as well today as it did decades ago.

Other pollsters use similar procedures. For example, Peter Hart has used respondents' reports of registration status, past voting in other races and current intention to vote, interest in the election and estimate of its importance, and awareness of the candidates and where to vote (Goldhaber 1984, 49). In 1998, a CBS News/*New York Times* poll identified likely voters as those who said that they voted in either 1996 or 1994, that they were paying attention to the current campaign, and that they would definitely vote in November. Respondents who voted in both 1994 and 1996 were defined as "more likely voters" (Kagay 1998). One interesting result of the CBS News/*New York Times* classification was that the more likely a respondent was to vote, the more that person tended to be pro-Republican. For example, registered voters in the 1998 poll preferred Democratic to Republican congressional candidates, 45 percent to 37 percent. But among likely voters, the Democrats led by only 47 percent to 42 percent, and among the most likely voters, Republicans led, 48 percent to 44 percent.

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After tracking polls did not correctly predict the outcome of the 1988 New Hampshire primary, ABC News/*Washington Post* pollsters changed the way they determined who the likely voters would be (Morin 1988b). In their New Hampshire polling, the ABC News/*Washington Post* pollsters had simply asked self-described registered voters if they were certain to vote, if they would probably vote, if the chances were 50–50, or if they would probably not vote. Anyone who said that he or she was certain to vote was considered a likely voter. This method produced a sample whose projected turnout rate was twice as high as the real rate because people often say they will vote even when they will not; they want to portray themselves as good citizens. Therefore, ABC News/*Washington Post* decided to establish multiple criteria for determining a likely voter. For example, the respondent had to say that he or she was certain to vote and had to have voted in 1986. Other factors also were considered, including strength of commitment to a candidate. This more stringent test of likely voters generated more accurate results but also resulted in more interviews with registered voters being tossed aside when election predictions were made.

A somewhat different approach has been taken by the *Columbus Dispatch*, which uses mailed questionnaires. As discussed in Chapter 4, mailed questionnaires have low response rates, and the representativeness of the people who do reply is uncertain. *The Dispatch* partially corrects for these problems by mailing questionnaires to samples selected from lists of registered voters. In 1994 and 1995, the paper used its mailed questionnaires but also commissioned telephone surveys by the Gallup Organization. Overall, the *Dispatch* results were much more accurate than the Gallup telephone polls, most likely because the mail poll did a better job of estimating the likely electorate. Anyone who completes a mailed questionnaire probably has a level of motivation indicative of a likely voter; the Gallup screen for likely voters simply consisted of registered voters who said they were likely to vote.

Visser et al. (1996) conducted an extensive comparative analysis of the performance of the *Dispatch* mail poll and the telephone polls that the University of Akron and the University of Cincinnati conducted in Ohio elections between 1980 and 1994. Overall, the election predictions of the final *Dispatch* poll were much more accurate than those generated by the telephone surveys. Numerous reasons were given for its superiority: a larger sample size, a questionnaire that closely resembled the actual ballot, response categories that minimized undecided answers and eliminated the need to allocate undecided respondents, and sampling and response procedures that produced more representative samples. Thus, contrary to conventional wisdom, mail questionnaires with an average response rate of only 25 percent were more accurate than telephone surveys. Even more surprising, for the

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final preelection *Dispatch* polls, the deadline for the newspaper to receive the mailed surveys was typically the Thursday before Election Day. Therefore, no information was gathered over the last weekend before the election, a time when sizable shifts in voter preference might occur, and yet the *Dispatch* polls were still more accurate. The *Dispatch* experience may lead some pollsters to rethink some of the conventional wisdom.

As difficult as it is to estimate turnout in primary and general elections, it is even more problematic in presidential caucuses, such as the Iowa precinct caucuses, the first step in the formal delegate selection process in choosing a president. Caucuses in general require a much more substantial personal and time commitment than simply casting a vote. One must typically attend a gathering of fellow party members at a school, a meeting hall, a church, or some other location, an event that can last for hours. Caucuses also entail citizens expressing their candidate preferences in a public setting. It is easy for a person to say in response to a poll question that he or she will participate in the caucus and support Candidate X. It is a lot more difficult for that same person to show up at the caucus deliberations. In late 2015, questions arose about participation and preferences in the 2016 Iowa GOP precinct caucuses, particularly with respect to the Trump candidacy. Are the polls showing Trump running strong in Iowa accurate? Are his supporters familiar with the caucus process, and will they turn out? Will Trump build a ground game to help his supporters navigate the challenges of caucus participation? What if his supporters are less connected to groups and organizations that foster caucus participation? Alternatively, what if Trump's extensive media coverage, his strong personality, and his intense issue positions actually draw more people to the caucuses and expand the caucus electorate? Pollsters are going to have a challenge identifying the likely caucus electorate. Two polls conducted in late 2015 about the Iowa precinct caucuses illustrate the consequences of defining the likely electorate in different ways. A CNN/ORC poll showed Trump leading Ted Cruz by a vote of 33 percent to 20 percent, with Marco Rubio and Ben Carson running measurably behind. The CNN/ORC poll estimated likely voters by asking them a battery of questions, such as their intention to participate in the caucus, their interest in news about the caucus, and their past participation in caucuses. A Monmouth University poll conducted in the same time period found that Cruz and Marco Rubio were running measurably ahead of Trump. Why the difference between the two polls' results. One possible answer is that the Monmouth survey drew its sample from voter registration lists and deemed likely caucus participants to be those Iowans who had regularly voted in state-level Republican primary elections in previous election years. The Monmouth University poll did find that among Iowans who were not regular GOP primary voters, Trump was ahead. Thus, the

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question becomes, Which poll has done the better job identifying likely caucus participants? In this case, different definitions of likely caucus participants led to very different predictions. Cruz ultimately won the Iowa caucuses, with Trump finishing second and Rubio, a strong third.

Do Respondents Lie?

Obviously, the accuracy of election predictions will be lessened if respondents lie to pollsters. But what might they lie about? One obvious answer is their stated intention to vote when they indeed will not vote. One cannot identify likely voters only by asking citizens if they are going to vote since some respondents will lie and give the correct, socially desirable answer that they will vote. After all, the job of a good American is to vote. Respondents can also lie about other items, such as their willingness to vote for a candidate of a particular religion, racial or ethnic group, gender, or sexual orientation. In the interview situation, some respondents may feel the need to give what they perceive to be the socially approved response even if they will not vote that way. This phenomenon has occurred in the context of white voters claiming to support black candidates when they, in fact, do not. In the 1982 race for governor of California, Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, a black Democrat, narrowly lost to a white Republican, despite the preelection polls showing Bradley with a substantial lead. The explanation given for the discrepancy between the poll results and the actual election results was simple: Some white voters would not reveal their opposition to a black candidate. Thus was born the Bradley effect. The notion of the Bradley effect can be expanded beyond race to any candidate characteristic that might generate hidden opposition. Did Americans, in the past, lie about their willingness to vote for a Catholic? Would Americans be fully forthcoming in letting pollsters know their true feelings about voting for a Mormon or a Jew or a woman or a Latino or a gay for president? As it relates to race, the Bradley effect today seems to be very small (Hopkins 2009). There was much discussion in 2008, prior to the presidential election, as to whether there would be a Bradley effect with respect to the Obama candidacy. Some observers said no, that the United States had changed and that race was not as salient a factor as it was twenty years earlier. Other observers argued that Obama needed to remain above 50 percent in the polls to actually win the popular vote since undecideds might break against him because of his race, and some white Democratic voters might be lying to pollsters about their willingness to vote for the black Democratic candidate. (For differing views on this topic, *see* Altman [2008], Barth [2008], Carroll [2008], Fulbright [2008], Greener [2008], Holmes [2008], Levin [2008], Morrison [2008], Novak [2008], and Silver [2008].)

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The fact that the preelection polls were so congruent with the actual vote totals suggests that there was no noteworthy Bradley effect in 2008. Keeter et al. (2009) conducted a more sophisticated and complex analysis that also suggested that whatever Bradley effect there was in 2008 was quite modest.

Finally, there may be other reasons why respondents might not reveal their true preferences in a poll. Perhaps they might perceive that their views would be scorned by others. Perhaps they know they are expressing unpopular preferences. Perhaps there is a social-desirability phenomenon at work in which some people do not want to reveal their views lest they be judged negatively by others. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed how Donald Trump was performing better in online surveys than in live-interviewer telephone polls. We speculated that maybe it is easier for a respondent to say that he or she supports Trump when responding online than when talking to a real person. Perhaps there is a social-desirability influence at play here.

The Changing Political and Economic Climate

Surveys predict best when there is a normal voter turnout pattern, as is demonstrated by the polls of 1982. Those polls performed poorly because they consistently underestimated the Democratic turnout, which was higher than expected that year because of the deepening economic recession and effective efforts by labor unions and black organizations to mobilize participation by their members. Moreover, although voter turnout is usually low among the unemployed, the 1982 election may have been atypical because many of the newly unemployed had been regular voters, and they participated at a higher-than-expected rate (Rothenberg 1983, 8).

The 1982 contest that probably did the most damage to the polls' reputation was the Illinois gubernatorial election. Most polls had predicted that incumbent Republican governor James Thompson would score a fifteen- to twenty-point victory over Democrat Adlai Stevenson III. But when the votes were tabulated, Thompson won by less than 0.2 percent.

Kohut (1983) and Day and Becker (1984) tested numerous hypotheses about the inaccuracy of the 1982 Illinois polls. They ruled out some, such as last-minute shifts in preference that the polls missed; polls were conducted to the very end of the campaign, and they still showed Thompson winning by a large margin. A poor estimate of the likely voters also was ruled out. Instead, the polls' poor performance seems to have been caused mainly by an upsurge in straight-ticket voting among Democrats, including some who preferred Thompson to Stevenson but still cast a straight-Democratic vote. In Chicago, the Democratic organization had devoted its resources to a "Punch 10" (that is, vote straight Democratic) media

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campaign, an effort that was particularly effective in black areas, where it was part of an overall anti-Reagan theme (Day and Becker 1984, 613; Kohut 1983, 42). Thus, a good part of the Illinois poll debacle stemmed from political organization and mobilization, developments that are difficult to anticipate and assess by means of a poll.

Another example of inaccuracy occurred in the 1994 midterm elections, in which the Republican victory was more sweeping than had been indicated by the polls conducted weeks before the elections. Perhaps part of the discrepancy was attributable to the difficulty of estimating the likely Democratic and Republican turnout, but this time, events in the ten days before the elections also may have affected the results. Extensive and visible campaigning by President Clinton, for example, may have served to nationalize many local contests, to the advantage of the GOP. The polls conducted right before Election Day were largely on target in predicting the Republican sweep, as many races broke in favor of the GOP over the final weekend of the campaign. A similar situation occurred in the 2002 midterm congressional elections, in which the Election Day results evidenced greater Republican success than had been expected based on polls conducted weeks earlier. Some attribute the GOP's strong performance to effective and extensive campaigning by President Bush and the greater ability of the Republican Party to frame the key issues of the election.

In the 2006 midterm elections, the final results reflected what many of the preelection polls were indicating: a solid Democratic victory in the U.S. House of Representatives. A whole variety of indicators, such as the generic congressional ballot question, congressional approval ratings, presidential approval ratings, attitudes about Iraq, concerns about the economy, views on issues such as health care and corruption, and many others, all suggested that the Democrats would regain control of the House. Yet even in the last week of the election, there was much speculation about how late changes in the political climate would affect the outcome. Would the president's campaigning and the famed GOP seventy-two-hour effort save the Republican majority? Would John Kerry's muffed joke hurt the Democrats? Would television news stories and pictures of an increasingly violent Iraq hurt the Republicans? How would American react to these late developments? In the event of a Democratic wave, would the way that congressional district boundaries had been drawn protect many Republican seats? In 2010, the generic congressional ballot; approval ratings of Congress; approval ratings of incumbent members of Congress; and concerns about the economy, the deficit, health care reform, and other issues all converged to suggest that the GOP would regain control of the U.S. House of Representatives and dramatically reduce the Democratic advantage in the U.S. Senate. Both outcomes occurred.

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Early in 2015, it appeared that the dominant issues in the 2016 presidential campaign would be a cluster of interrelated items related to the economy—wage growth; the availability of good, well-paying jobs; the shrinking middle class; the widening gap between the rich and everyone else; and the like. But later in 2015, the world and terrorism intervened. The terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, the beheadings and other atrocities carried out by ISIS and other terrorist groups, and the widespread violence and instability in the Middle East have resulted in a shift in what Americans deem to be the most important problems facing the country. And this, in turn, will have consequences for the candidates seeking office, their tactics and strategies, and their own strengths and weaknesses.

How Preelection Polls Affect Voters

Speculation about how polls affect voters has been widespread and contradictory. Some observers argue that polls that show one candidate ahead of another encourage supporters of the trailing candidate to change their preference and climb on board the winning candidate's bandwagon. Others emphasize underdog effects—sympathetic voters, they claim, rally around the candidate the polls show to be losing. Little strong evidence supports either view. The bandwagon effect would require that leading candidates consistently increase their margin, and the underdog effect predicts that the losing candidate will inexorably gain on the leader. These kinds of simple effects have not shown up consistently.

An experimental study by de Bock (1976) found some evidence that reports of disheartening poll results weakened support and motivation to turn out among a candidate's adherents. However, this finding seems to have been influenced by the experimental design itself, in which exposure to the negative polls was much more direct than would be the case in the real world. Other experimental studies have shown that polls can encourage support for the underdog, although the effects are not strong (Marsh 1984).

A 1985 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll attempted to address the effects of polls on voter choice. The survey asked a sample of Americans whether they knew whom the polls had favored in the 1984 election and whether the polls had influenced their voting behavior (Sussman 1985d). Seventy-eight percent correctly knew that the polls had picked Reagan to win, 7 percent said Mondale, and 15 percent did not know or remember what the polls had said. Among the 78 percent who knew the polls had predicted a Reagan victory, 4 percent said it helped them decide for Reagan, 4 percent said it helped them decide for Mondale, and 93 percent said it had no effect. Sussman concluded that the preelection polls could not have had any significant impact on the vote split because the pro-Mondale and pro-Reagan effects almost canceled each other out.

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You Can't Fool Us...

Jeff Danziger Cartoons

Anyone using Sussman's study, however, should weigh three factors. First, asking people to recall their views seven months after the election is risky—people simply forget. Second, Sussman's procedure required people to remember explicitly that the polls had influenced them; polls can influence voters even though they may not be aware of it. Third, some people might not be willing to admit that the polls affected their vote lest they appear to be making decisions on inappropriate grounds. Despite these reservations, Sussman's conclusion seems plausible in general and certainly so for the 1984 election.

Bandwagon and underdog effects can and do occur, but their magnitude is small and probably inconsequential. Polls may affect voters indirectly through their impact on campaign contributors, campaign workers, and media coverage. In addition to affecting voting behavior, polls can influence public opinion itself, a topic addressed in Chapter 9. For example, if people become aware of changes in public opinion on an issue, that information may lead them to support the position favored by the trend. Or if they learn that their views are not shared by their fellow citizens, they may become unwilling to express their views. The very act of polling people can sensitize them to politics and campaigns in general and can encourage them to seek out information or become more involved. Given the prominence of polls in elections and in political discourse in general, it is important for citizens

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to understand both the positive and the manipulative uses made of polls, regardless of the original intent.

Conclusion

By and large, election polls in the United States are very accurate, particularly those conducted and sponsored by reputable media and polling organizations. In nations where the history of polling and free elections is much shorter, the track record of polls is far less impressive. For example, in December 1993, in the first multiparty election ever held in Russia, the pollsters' performance was abysmal. Shlapentokh (1994) recounts that the pollsters failed to predict the victorious party and even the order in which the parties would finish. In some countries, polling is problematic for both technical and cultural reasons. For example, it may be very difficult to pick a good sample; telephone ownership may not be widespread, and other information about residential units, especially in rural areas, may be flawed. Citizens in countries with traditions of totalitarian governments and repression may be wary about being interviewed by strangers and therefore may not participate in polling or give answers that reflect their true views. As one Russian analyst commented about the difficulties of polling in the former Soviet Union, "You are talking about sampling 30,000 villages and more than 1,000 cities. You must go to places that have for decades despised authority and then ask people their most personal fears about the future. And they are supposed to tell people they have never met what is on their mind" (Specter 1996).

Fortunately, these technical and cultural problems are far less prevalent in the United States, and the track record of American election polls is impressive. Of greater concern is how the polling enterprise affects the behavior of citizens in a democratic nation. We return to the issue of how the polls affect citizens and society in the last chapter.

Exercises

1. First, examine the national-level preelection polls conducted between Labor Day and Election Day by two different polling organizations in the 2008 or 2012 presidential election. Note changes in the relative standings of the Democratic and Republican candidates and the minor-party candidates over this time period. Try to link specific campaign occurrences to changes in the candidates' poll standings. Then, compare how similar or dissimilar the results of the two polling organizations were over the period from Labor Day to Election Day.

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Next, pick two states, and follow the state-level polls for the same time period. Pick one state in which the presidential contest was very close and a second state in which the contest was lopsided. Trace the fluctuations in the poll results in both states. How does sampling error affect your description of how the presidential contest was unfolding in each of the states you selected?

2. Pollsters often query Americans about what they think is the most important problem facing the nation and which political party can better address that problem. Find one polling organization that has asked these types of questions, and trace the responses of the American people between early 2014 and late 2015. How did citizens' responses change over this time period? See whether the polls you are analyzing examined subsets of the American population as defined by partisanship, race, gender, ethnicity, and other categories. Were there any differences among subsets of Americans as to what they thought were the most important problems facing the country? What do the patterns you uncovered suggest to you about possible Democratic and Republican campaign strategies and messages in presidential and congressional elections?

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