

# PRE-ELECTION POLLS AND THEIR POSITIVE ROLES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ELECTORAL MEANING

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Pre-election polls get a lot of bad press (see Holley, 1991; Lavrakas, Holley & Miller, 1991; Wheeler, 1980). Polls are perceived as a threat to democracy, focusing public attention on the political horse race while drawing attention away from important issues.

But are polls necessarily bad? There is a possibility that polls have a positive effect on the election process. With major U.S. newspapers and media questioning and reshaping their concepts and structures of pre-election coverage (Meyer, 1993), the value of polls becomes an important question. Before editors decide to ban polls or dismiss horse-race election coverage, the various positive roles that polls play for readers should be explored.

The perception of newspaper editors that pre-election polls are harmful appears to be shared by the public. In a national public opinion poll, a larger percentage (44% vs. 36%) of respondents said polls were harmful as opposed to being useful (Lavrakas et al, 1991). Such results support the popular paradigm that polls shape rather than reflect public opinion.

Clearly, the prevalent belief--even among those who would defend polls--is that the media's reporting of poll results has a direct effect on public attitudes and voting behavior (Merkle, 1991). Critics conclude that polls are bad for the nation or bad for democracy (Traugott, 1988, 1991; Lavrakas et al, 1991).

Typically, complaints about pre-election polls fall into certain categories:

- Pre-election polls allow the media to emphasize in its reports who is ahead and who is behind, influencing voters' choices by affecting their assessments of candidates' electability and image (see Patterson, 1980; Meyer, 1989; Lavrakas et al, 1991).
- Polls themselves affect public opinion through the process of measuring that opinion, thus enhancing the chance that the polls will change opinion (Lavrakas et al 1991).
- Polls do not contain useful information for the public, and in fact are too accurate, containing information that discourages people from voting when they believe the polls indicate that the

election outcome is a foregone conclusion (Lavrakas et al, 1991)

- Polls, by emphasizing winning and losing, slight more important issues that need coverage (Graber, 1989).
- Polls are poorly reported, leading to confusion about how they should be interpreted (Lavrakas et al, 1991). The reports lack context, they do not explain how the polls might be in error, and they are oversimplified (see Meyer, 1989, Hickman, 1991; Holley, 1991).
- There are too many polls, stating the obvious (see Meyer, 1989), while confusing and antagonizing the public (Lavrakas et al, 1991).
- Polls make too many mistakes (see Meyer, 1989).

The Case For Polls. One of the few positive voices for polls, Phil Meyer (1989), argues that even if polls do shape opinion, the polls have multiple benefits to voters and the democratic process. Polls can lead to consensus formation, one of the major purposes of the election process. As Meyer (1989, p. 200) suggested, "Is it not reasonable to suppose that giving voters accurate information about each other, about the relative voting strength and the preferences of different groups in the electorate might help, not hurt?" But the expectation that polls help voters has been rarely tested empirically.

Underlying much of the criticism of pre-election polls is the idea that the public is not capable of using polls in a rational way. For example, Lavrakas et al (1991, pp. 180-181) found evidence that the public pays attention to polls and that two-thirds of people believe polls are informative, and yet the researchers complain that "Americans do not understand the strengths and limits of election polls and thus are not 'well-informed consumers' when it comes to processing this type of news/information."

Research Questions. Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) have argued that political information should be conceptualized in a broad sense to include facts, catch-phrases or whatever an individual reports as helping to construct a political world. Political learning increases when an audience has a context for processing information that is relevant and accessible (Neuman et al, 1992). A rational use of information, including horse-race polls, thus becomes any use that helps a

voter construct meaning out of an election campaign. These conclusions lead to the main research question for this study:

Do polls provide a context that makes election messages more accessible to the public?

To explore the role of polls, we will perform a secondary analysis of two surveys. The first is from a post-election random survey of 934 voters and non-voters in Wichita, Kansas, after the 1990 governor's race. During this election, the Wichita Eagle became one of the first major newspapers to attempt to force candidates to address issues that concerned their readers. This survey was part of the newspaper's effort to track the success of its project. The second data set to be analyzed is a pre-election random survey of 841 adults in the state of North Carolina during the 1992 presidential election.

The third part of this study is a laboratory experiment that used 12 manipulated news stories, some of which included or did not include poll results. By using three data sets, obtained under different conditions at different times, we hope that a more complete picture of polls will emerge.

The following hypotheses were formulated for the survey data:

H1) Exposure to polls will be positively associated with campaign interest among Wichita residents.

H2) Attention to polls will be positively associated with self-perceived knowledge among North Carolina residents.

The following hypotheses were formed for the laboratory experiment:

H3) Poll content in news stories will increase reader interest in the election reported.

H4) Readers of stories with poll content will be more likely to find those stories useful in choosing a candidate.

#### WICHITA DATA

The Wichita data sets comes from a panel design: first wave, a random sample of 600 adult residents; with mortality, the second wave of 432 adults; and a control group of 502 adults sampled only once, after the election. The data collection was sponsored and paid for by the Wichita Eagle and was limited to a random sample of residents in the newspaper's circulation area. For this secondary analysis, the panel design was not used because the main independent variables were not measured during the first wave. Instead, the data sets that were analyzed included the combined set for the second wave of the panel and the control group (total n=934), both of which were surveyed immediately after the 1990 governor's election in Kansas.

Dependent Variable. To measure interest in the political campaigns, the dependent variable, Interest, was measured by asking respondents, "Some people don't pay much attention to the political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested or not much interested in following the political campaigns this year?"

Main Independent Variables. The independent variables of interest are exposure to poll stories in the Wichita Eagle and exposure to issue summary boxes in the newspaper. The dichotomous variables were based on a two-step question. First, respondents were asked if they read campaign news about the governor's race in the Wichita Eagle. If they said yes, they were asked if they read stories about results of political polls. Likewise, a similar question was asked for readers of "summary boxes" that summarized the candidates' stands on important issues in the governor's race.

In choosing these two independent variables, the researchers took into account the comments of a Wichita Eagle editor who explained that high readership of the summary boxes (one of six specific content areas for which exposure counts were collected) and the low readership of polls were evidence that readers wanted to read about issues but not polls, justifying the minimal use of polls.

Method. Hierarchical regression was used to compare the influence of the independent variables on campaign Interest after controlling for demographics: age, race, gender, education and income; and for voter characteristics: did they vote in the election, whom they voted for, and political party identification. These control variables (categorical variables were dummy coded) accounted for more than one-fifth of the variance in the dependent variable, requiring that the independent variables (measuring exposure to polls and issue boxes) overcome this r-squared if they were to make significant contributions to predicting Interest. Due to the large number of cases, the 14 cases with missing values for independent variables were discarded, leaving a total sample of 920 for the regression analyses.

Results. About 84% of the respondents who read the Eagle campaign news specifically read the summary boxes of the issue stands, while only about 65% of the respondents read poll stories.

Equation 1 is the base equation, using demographic variables and respondent characteristics. It accounts for about 23% of the variance in Interest (df=919, F=27.66, p<.001). In Equation 2, Exposure to Polls is entered increasing the r-squared of the base equation by 1.4% (df=919, F=27.03, p<.001).

Exposure to Polls makes a significant ( $t=4.03$ ,  $p<.001$ ) contribution to predicting Interest.

Equation 3 allows a comparison of the poll effect and the issue box effect. Exposure to Issue Summaries was entered in the regression equation, increasing the r-squared of the base equation by 1.7% ( $df=919$ ,  $F=27.49$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Exposure to Issue Summaries makes a significant ( $t=4.48$ ,  $p<.001$ ) contribution to predicting Interest.

In Equation 4, the two exposure variables are entered together. When compared with the base equation, they increase the r-squared by 2.1%. Both Exposure to Polls ( $t=2.16$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Exposure to Summaries ( $t=2.91$ ,  $p<.01$ ) make a significant contribution to predicting Interest.

Discussion. In comparing Equations 2 and 3, and taking Equation 4 into account, we believe a decision to downplay polls may be a mistake when interest in a campaign is considered. Further, the strong positive correlation,  $r=.43$ , between campaign interest and voting suggests that Interest is an important variable in the democratic process and newspapers should be willing to include news content related to interest in election campaigns.

Polls and summary issue boxes explain about the same amount of variance in Interest, and they both remained significant contributors to Interest when they are entered into the equation together, suggesting that some readers who were highly interested in the campaign focused mainly on the poll results. Although a large percentage of readers read the summary boxes or both summary boxes and polls, certain other readers may have focused only on poll information.

Obviously, these data are from one election in one part of the nation and are not generalizable to the nation. Although the results cannot be used to imply causality, analysis of the hierarchical regression supports the narrow hypothesis H1) that reading poll stories is positively associated with interest in an election campaign.

#### CAROLINA POLL

Subjects for this secondary analysis were 841 adult residents of North Carolina, who were interviewed during a six-day period just before election day in 1992. Interviewers (students from news writing and research classes from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at UNC-Chapel Hill) used random-digit dialing and over-sampled a 10-county area of Charlotte. Students were required to be interviewers as part of a class assignment and they received credit for participating. Each number was dialed at least four times before it was discarded. The bi-annual poll is jointly conducted by the university's

Institute for Research in Social Science the journalism school. Data were weighted to correct for the oversampling so the results can be generalized to the state of North Carolina. A rounding off error created a total n of 845 .

Dependent Variables. The dependent variables, Self-Perceived (SP) Knowledge was measured by asking respondents how much they thought they knew about the election, nothing at all, a little, some, or a lot.

Independent Variables. The independent variables to be studied are Attention to Polls, Attention to TV Ads and Attention to TV News. Attention to Polls was based on one question asking how much attention respondents paid to polls about who was winning and losing in the presidential campaign (on a 4-point scale, none at all, a little, some, or a lot). Attention to TV Ads and Attention to TV News were each measured by a composite of two questions, asking respondents how much they paid attention to TV ads and TV news about the Clinton campaign and TV ads and TV news about the Bush campaign.

Method. Hierarchical regression was used to compare the influence of the independent variables after controlling for demographics: age, gender, education, income and whether they lived in an urban or rural area; and for voter characteristics: intention to vote in the election, whom they reported that they would vote for if the election were held today, and political party identification.

Missing values for the control variables were handled by substituting the mean if the case was missing a value for age, income or education and entering a separate dummy variable for each of the three variables into the regression equation (income dummy, age dummy, education dummy: value coded as 1 if demographic information is not reported, 0 otherwise.)

Results. With SP Knowledge the dependent variable (mean=3.30, sd=.769), Equation 1 establishes the base measure, showing influence of the control variables, which explain about 21% percent of the variance ( $df=844$ ,  $F=13.87$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Equation 2 indicates that Attention to Polls adds 3.3% to the incremental r-squared and significantly contributes to predicting SP Knowledge ( $t=6.01$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

For comparison, Equations 3 and 4 indicate the relative contribution of Attention to TV Ads and Attention to TV News. Attention TV Ads contributes a significant ( $t=4.73$ ,  $p<.001$ ) 2.1% of variance explained to the base equation. Attention TV News is clearly a much stronger predictor variable than the other two, contributing a significant ( $t=10.45$ ,  $p<.001$ ) 9.2% increase in the r-squared of the base equation.

Equation 5, with all three independent variables entered explains 9.7% more of the variance than the base equation, with Attention to Polls ( $t=2.39$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Attention to TV News ( $t=8.36$ ,  $p<.001$ ), but not Attention to TV Ads, making significant contributions to prediction of SP Knowledge.

**Discussion.** Comparing Equations 2 and 3 we find that Attention to Polls has a larger influence than Attention to TV Ads in explaining voters' perceptions of their own knowledge after controlling for effects of demographics and voter characteristics. Even when all three variables are entered into the regression equation, Attention to Polls remains a significant contributor to SP Knowledge, while Attention to TV Ads does not make a significant contribution. An overall analysis of the hierarchical regression provides strong support for H2) Attention to polls will be positively associated with self-perceived knowledge among North Carolina residents.

#### EXPERIMENTAL DATA

Most experiments involving news stories with poll content have been used to explore the influence of polls in shaping support for candidates who are ahead or losing the race. Typically, such experiments have used voter preference or intention to vote as the dependent variable (Ceci & Kain, 1982; Lavrakas et al, 1991) when trying to predict opinion shifts according to reports on which presidential candidate is winning or losing. Instead of looking at how polls affect opinion change or voter preference, our experiment considers how polls may have a positive influence on voter attitudes toward the campaign. According to the hypotheses stated above, it was expected that news stories that included poll information about who was winning or losing the race would increase reader interest and reader perception of the usefulness of the story, when compared with similar stories that did not include poll information.

**Method.** The design of this experiment called for creation of a pair of news stories dealing with issue information and a pair without issue information. In each pair, one story had poll information added to create a total of four treatments. We also wanted stories to be at three levels, for a total of 12 news stories. One level of stories was based on the actual national presidential election of 1992, and the other two levels involved fictitious elections: a mayoral race and a race for student body president at an unnamed university.

Multiple stories and levels were used to minimize the possibility that some element of the stories other than poll effects caused the effects to be measured.

**Treatments.** One pair of news stories at each level included issue information, with the pair of stories nearly identical except for the manipulation, which included a paragraph that told readers who was winning the race and that the loser was closing the gap between the two. The other pair of stories included no issue information, focusing on trivial campaign news, while including poll information in one story for each of the pairs. All the stories were about the same length, with minor information being deleted from stories that had poll information added.

The analysis of the data was planned to be a one-way analysis of variance. The interactions between levels and treatments are not of interest to this study. It may be useful, however, to visualize the design as a  $2 \times 2 \times 3$  : with the treatments being Issue story or Non-Issue story BY Poll story or Non-poll story BY the three levels of Presidential Race, Mayoral Race and University Student President Race.

**Subjects.** Seventy-two students, mostly undergraduates in a journalism school at the University of North Carolina, each read three of the 12 news stories in an repeated measures, incomplete, randomized design. The order of story presentation was counter-balanced.

**Procedures.** The subjects read one story and then answered questions relating to the story, and then read another story etc. Students volunteered to participate in the experiments and received credit in one of their journalism school classes for participating. All the experiments were conducted between 5 and 7 p.m. on a weekday in the middle of the fall semester, about two weeks before the national elections of 1992. Subjects took from 20 to 30 minutes to complete the experiments.

**Dependent Variables.** This study includes two dependent variables: interest in the campaign and usefulness of a poll story in helping the reader decide whom to vote for. Subjects were asked to rate the stories on a 7-point Likert scale (1 equals low, 7 is high) for each of the variables: How interesting is the election campaign you just read about; and how useful was the story you just read in deciding which candidate to vote for? Before answering those questions, subjects "voted" for a candidate in each of the stories.

**Planned Analyses.** Because of the repeated measures incomplete design, the SAS General Linear Model (PC-version 6.4) was used, controlling for subject effect with the focus on the main effects of poll information. With four treatment groups, a one-tailed orthogonal contrast of the two treatments with poll information and the two treatments without poll information were planned.

**Results.** The differences in mean scores for the dependent variable Interest were not significant ( $F=0.62$ ;  $p>.05$ ) for treatment effects. A planned contrast was used to interpret the differences between the four treatments for the dependent variable Usefulness. The focus was on the contrast between stories with poll information and those stories without poll information: the combined effects of Issue story (mean=4.44, sd=1.67) and Non-issue story (mean=2.46, sd=1.57) in contrast with the combined effects of Issue plus Poll story (mean=4.81, sd=1.58) and Nonissue plus Poll story (mean=2.91, sd=1.59). The one-tailed contrast was significant at the .05 level ( $df=71$ ;  $t=1.87$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

**Discussion.** Support was found for H4) Readers of stories with poll content are likely to find those stories more useful in choosing a candidate. No support was found for H3) Poll content in news stories will increase reader interest in the election reported.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Support was found for three of the four proposed hypotheses: polls are positively associated with voter interest in the campaigns (Wichita data); attention to polls is positively associated with self-perceived knowledge (Carolina data); poll content in news stories helps readers in deciding how to vote (Experiment).

The findings of this study should not be surprising. It makes sense that poll information is useful information for the busy voter in a confusing world of multiple message sources. Complaints about polls generally assume that the valuable information is being misused in some way, either by a media obsessed with insider politics (see Meyer, 1993) or by an electorate too ignorant or too smart to use the information correctly (Lavrakas et al, 1991). This study does not address the misuse of polls, but it does suggest that polls help voters make sense of elections.

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