

# Another Day, Another Poll: Trends in Media Coverage of Polls and Surveys in the Election Realm and the Non-Election Realm

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## Abstract

The monitoring of public opinion plays an important role in accountability of elected officials in a democracy (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). However, the high volume of poll reports, quasi-scientific surveys, and criticism of both in the media may have troubling consequences. There are structural reasons within the news media (Rosensteil, 2005) and within election campaigns (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2005) for heavy reporting and commissioning of polls. This is likely part of the puzzle of declining participation rates which have troubled our industry over the past few decades. We theorized that this media saturation could have a devaluating effect on public perception of surveys, thereby depressing participation rates. Indeed, there is evidence that this steady diet of poll reports increased survey refusals on the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (Stroud and Kenski, 2007). At the same time, we theorized that media coverage could have an educational effect by both explaining the purpose of surveys and by demonstrating how they are part of the fabric of research and government in America. This educational effect could in fact positively impact survey participation rates.

Our research takes initial steps to quantify the amount of media coverage of polls and surveys. We counted the number of stories mentioning “poll” or “survey” in the New York Times, the Chicago Sun Times and the Network Evening News in two periods in 1991 and 2007. We evaluated whether the context in which the media presented the poll or survey was positive, negative, or neutral, as well as if the survey was related to the political realm or the non-political realm. By analyzing these basic trends, we were able to present a basic picture of how media coverage has changed and discuss the implications this may have for the public. Our research methodology is at the very formative stage; we see this article as an opportunity to discuss this theory and research methodology with other survey researchers.

**Key Words:** response rates, surveys, polls, media coverage

## 1. Declining Survey Participation Rates

Beginning in the late 1980s, survey participation rates began to decline (Singer, 2006). De Leeuw and de Heer (2002) examined response rates from 10 surveys conducted in 16 countries and found clear evidence of the downward trend. The authors concluded that the decrease in response was due to increases in the rate of refusals. Curtin, Presser, and Singer (2005) discuss decreases in response rates that were even steeper in the late 1990s and early 2000s when caller-identification technology became widespread. In the current context, refusals now contribute more to response rate declines than noncontacts.

## 2. The Benefits of Participating in a Survey

Why participate in a survey? Survey researchers answer this question in terms of the overarching theory put forth by Don Dillman which in short, states that people participate when the benefits which accrue to them for participating exceed the costs which they bear from participating. The major cost of participating in a survey is the respondent’s time. This is a cost which has always been high, and it may be growing higher as time demands increase.

Our research focuses on the benefits side, specifically, the benefits that accrue to society from the survey and the benefits that accrue to the individual from the positive feeling s/he receives from helping society. For the respondent to weigh these benefits, s/he has to understand what the benefits are. The news media is one very common source from

which people hear about surveys. Can the way the media discusses surveys influence the way people understand the benefits of surveys? Does the media directly describe a survey's research goals and societal benefits? Does the media imply indirectly that surveys are important? unimportant? ubiquitous? easy to accomplish? These were the thoughts that led us to this research.

### 3. Research Questions

As mentioned above, our research questions were exploratory. We had different theories, sometimes conflicting theories, about how media coverage of surveys could influence people's understanding of the benefits of surveys and, ultimately, participation rates. For example, we believed that media coverage could both have an educational effect as well as a devaluing effect. We also believed it could have a politicizing effect. If the media portrays surveys as the exclusive tool of the political pollster, it could be difficult for someone to comprehend a social science angle to the survey. Furthermore, a person with negative feelings about politics could project those feelings onto the social science survey.

We formulated three research questions.

*1. Has there been an increase or decrease in media coverage of surveys and polls over time?*

Many surveys and polls covered by the media concern pre-election polling or public opinion of elected officials, which we termed the "election realm." We wondered if the proportion of stories in which the survey concerns the "election realm" relative to the stories in which the survey concerns the non election realm could influence how the public understands surveys. Our second research question measured this coverage.

*2. Has there been a change over time in the proportion of election-based stories about surveys/polls relative to non election-based stories about surveys/polls?*

*3. Has there been a change over time in the proportion of surveys/polls which explain the public good of the survey/poll?*

### 4. Methodology

We searched three media sources for any mention of the word "survey" or "poll" in the article text or title. We analyzed all articles published in September – October 1991 and September – October 2007 in the New York Times, the Chicago Sun Times, and the network Evening News (NBC and CBS).

The question of where people get their news from (newspaper, TV, internet, casual conversation, or simply from nowhere at all) is a concept that continues to evolve. We chose the NBC and CBS evening news because these two networks had the largest audiences during the period we researched (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). We chose the New York Times because there is a strong tradition of media researchers looking to that publication. Finally, we chose the Chicago Sun Times to complement the New York Times because it is anecdotally seen as a more "working class" paper focusing on more local and basic issues than the NY Times tends to. One is always limited in media research by the impossibility of looking at every media outlet thoroughly. By choosing this sample, we have tried to choose carefully in order to best represent the variety of media outlets and reflect wider trends in the industry.

The reason we searched by word, rather than by the subject, was two fold. First, we wanted to use the same methodology for the different media outlets rather than relying on an indexing function. The full text of the three sources is available through archives and all have indexing algorithms within the search engines of the archives. However, the algorithms might differ from one another and we did not want to introduce that measurement error. The second reason we searched by word and not by subject, was in order to catch a broad array of stories that might mention a survey, even if the survey was not a central part of the story. For example, there was an obituary of George Gallup which was not about a survey. But it did discuss the origins and current state of survey research in a very positive light. We would only catch that type of a mention when searching by simple text.

Determining the date range to search was another crucial question. Since we did not have unlimited time and resources to complete the analysis of thousands of stories, we focused on two time periods to see if there was a difference between them. The particular dates were chosen in order that each should predate the November U.S. presidential election [either the Nov 1992 or the Nov 2008] by 13 months.

#### 4.1 Eligible and Ineligible Stories

When we cast the net wide by searching for any mention of a survey or poll, we got many “hits” that were not really about surveys and polls of interest to us, so we developed rules for eligibility. Eligible stories had to be reporting about the conduct, findings or discussion of a survey of people, or people in institutions.

Examples of eligible stories included:

- certainly any general population survey such as an election poll or scientific research
- a survey of nurses or doctors in a hospital
- a poll of airline pilots
- editorials discussing surveys, such as the Federal Aviation Administration not publishing the survey of airline pilots, was also eligible.
- the criticism of a Census poll in order to correct a Census undercount.
- Public opinion about foreign nations, as well as public opinion or election polls in foreign nations

Examples of ineligible surveys included:

- A story recounting a survey of very tiny populations, such as “these four teenagers,” is ineligible. Similarly, many economic indicators take polls of purchasing managers or bank lenders, and these stories were ineligible.
- The mention of the term “according to an unscientific poll I took” or the term “the director of polling” was not enough to make the story eligible.
- Going to the polls, as in voting, was ineligible because it is about voting, not about a survey.

#### 4.2 Public Good

We coded every story positive, negative, or neutral in terms of a concept we called “public good.” For the public good rating to be positive, the story has to clearly and concisely describe the public good that the survey’s research can bring about. As a survey research professional, this can be hard to code objectively. As someone in the survey industry, with exposure to lots surveys and public opinion research, it is pretty easy for us to see the public good in most surveys. Even in surveys related to marketing and business we can see the economic, and therefore societal, benefit. In surveys about political preferences, job performance of officials, and policy preferences we can also understand the positive benefits that these types of survey brings to a democratic society (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000, 2005) When coding, we forced ourselves to really look at the words of the story alone to see if the story was presenting the public good. We had to leave aside our own ability to connect the dots and conclude what good the study can achieve.

Examples of stories which we coded as positive are:

- Estrogen after Menopause Cuts Heart Attack Risk, Study Finds (the article described how this finding will help physicians and women improve their risk against heart attack).
- Today's Hidden Slave Trade, about a study of trafficking among young girls (the article described how study findings are leading to improved law enforcement to prevent trafficking).
- The Emergency Room Emergency (the article described how this study is finally exploring problems in emergency rooms which hospitals have long known about but were unable to quantify, and how this data will lead to policies which will make emergency rooms safer).

Examples of stories which we coded as negative are:

- Comments maligning polls in general for example, candidates using “poll tested phrases” or “anybody can take a poll to put forth their stand.”
- Focus on errors of particular surveys, such as:
- Dispute Over '90 Census Heads for Courts, Again.
- Diet and Fat: A Severe Case Of Mistaken Consensus.
- Sex Survey of Students Angers Conservatives.

If the story neither placed the survey in a negative light nor described the good of the survey, it was coded neutral.

#### **4.3 Election Realm**

If the story was covering a survey or poll which related directly to a campaign, a campaign issue, or job performance of a political figure, we coded it as election-based. Otherwise, we coded it as non election-based.

### **5. Findings**

#### **5.1 Research Question 1: *Has there been an increase or decrease in media coverage of surveys and polls over time?***

Taking all sources together, there were 553 survey/poll stories in 1991 and 595 in 2007, representing a modest increase of 7.5%.

#### **5.2 Research question 2: *Has there been a change over time in the proportion of election-based stories about surveys/polls relative to non election-based stories about surveys/polls?***

Taking all sources together, there has been a statistically significant increase in this proportion. In 1991 155 out of the 553 stories, or 28%, were election-based. In 2007 269 out of the 595, or 45%, were election-based. The three sources behaved differently from one another. The Chicago Sun Times showed the steepest increase in the proportion of election-based stories, increasing more than four-fold from 12% to 43%. The evening news also experienced a sharp rise in its proportion of election-based stories, increasing from 37% to 64%. For someone receiving their information from one of these sources, the message is that “most surveys are about elections.” However, the New York Times remained more consistent in its reporting, showing an increase from 40% to 44%.

#### **5.3 Research question 3: *Has there been a change over time in the proportion of surveys/polls which explain the public good of the survey/poll?***

Looking first at all sources, the overwhelming percentage of stories – 84% in 1991 and 88% in 2007, present a neutral view of the survey or poll’s public good. They describe the results of the survey in straightforward terms, neither mentioning the public good benefit of the survey nor suggesting anything negative about the survey. In fact, there are relatively few negative stories at all, only 6% in 1991 and 3% in 2007. The positive-public good stories represented 10% in 1991 and 9% in 2007. While all differences between the time periods were statistically significant, the magnitude of the differences is small.

When we looked at public good reporting separately among election-based surveys versus non election-based surveys, a different picture emerged. Interestingly, there were no election-based survey stories which were positive about the survey. Fully 96% were entirely straightforward, factual descriptions of how the public responded in the survey, and only 4% were negative in some way. These findings were consistent in 1991 and 2007.

It is only among non election-based stories that these sources mentioned the public good benefit of the survey. Taking all sources together, in 1991, 14% of the stories showed the public good, 80% were neutral, and 7% were negative. In 2007, 16% showed the public good, 81% were neutral and less than 3% were negative.

### **6. Discussion**

While there has not been a great rise in the reporting of surveys and polls by the media in our sample, there has been a sharp increase in the proportion of these stories which are election-based. The stories about election-based surveys virtually never mention the public good benefits of surveys. Outside the election realm there was a small (2.5%) increase in the proportion of stories which mentioned the public good. While it is heartening to see that public good reporting seems to have taken hold to some extent at least in the non election-based realm, the increase in the election realm may drown out the positive messages about surveys.

Interesting differences in public good reporting were noted among the three sources. Looking just at the non election-based stories, the Chicago Sun Times reported on the public good at a higher rate than did the evening news and the New York Times. In 1991, 18% of the Chicago Sun Times survey stories in the non election realm mentioned the public good; by 2007 this had increased to 25%. The Chicago Sun Times, at least in the sample we looked at, tended to search for the human interest angle in both their headlines and their article text. The public good of a survey can often be described in “human interest” type terms which are easy to understand and engaging for the layman. This formula seemed to be used successfully at Chicago Sun Times more than at the other sources we examined. From our perspective, it was heartening to see how frequently the Chicago Sun Times was able to bring out this element of the surveys and even more heartening to see how this percentage has increased since 1991. The evening news, for its part, mentioned the public good aspect of their non election-based surveys 17% of the time in both 1991 and 2007. The New York Times covered this aspect 7% of the time in 1991 and 12% in 2007.

## 7. Future Research

First, we would like to expand the sample of publications, to make our findings more generalizable. We may consider sampling some, but not all, stories and increasing the number of publications. We would also like to incorporate online media which was very prevalent in 2007, but not in 1991.

Second, we would like to examine additional time periods between 1991 and 2007 in order to better detect trends and to control for temporal circumstances in particular years. We note that the top stories in 1991 were the Clarence Thomas nomination, turmoil in the U.S.S.R., U.S. military bases in the Philippines, and the primary campaigns; in 2007 they were the primaries and the war in Iraq. All these stories engendered many surveys reported by the media. But in looking at the unusual high volume of polls about the Thomas nomination, it is natural to wonder whether this is a temporal circumstance which caused a particular spike in survey reports. Broadening the sample to additional time periods would help smooth away these spikes in the overall picture. Furthermore, we would like to examine additional months where campaign election coverage is lower. This might reveal different trends in the percent of survey stories in the election realm.

Third, it would be interesting to explore with media professionals why more stories do not portray the public good which can accrue to society from both election and non election-based surveys, and following up on that, to determine if we can describe our surveys to the media in such a way that the societal benefit of our surveys is more transparent. Ultimately, we would like to improve the way the public understands the benefits of surveys.

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