

Polls Are Part of the Air Politicians Breathe

By Michael Barone

Politicians pander, cater, genuflect, and toady to public opinion, we are told on one side. Politicians are responsive to the people, understand their needs, and are sensitive to their constituents, we are told on the other. Both sentences describe the phenomenon that is central to representative government. The Founders understood that the holders of the offices they created, especially the House of Representatives, would be sensitive to public opinion because they knew, after all, that the same situation had existed in Pericles's Athens and Cicero's Rome. They expected such sensitivity to public opinion would also exist in the republic they were creating which they hoped would continue through circumstances they could not imagine. And so it has.

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One circumstance the Founders could not have anticipated was the public opinion poll. Elections to the early Virginia House of Burgesses were held in public meetings where the candidates supplied food and drink, and each voter stood up before his peers and announced his choice. Their votes could not have been an entire mystery to the candidates. Those who cared about winning would naturally have talked with their neighbors about public issues and personal beliefs. They would have been alert to gossip about the opinions of others. They would have been quick to draw conclusions when an elector seemed to be changing his mind or doing something unexpected. So even before George Gallup published the first random sample public opinion poll in 1935, politicians were paying attention to what polling information they could muster.

This could take many forms. One is reminded of the story former House Speaker Tip O'Neill told when Mrs. Murphy learned that Mrs. O'Brien planned to vote Republican. "That can't be true," Mrs. Murphy said. "I saw her at Mass last Sunday." But O'Neill knew that it would be a rough year for the Democrats. In an only slightly more sophisticated and much more wide-ranging endeavor, campaign manager James A. Farley explained how he accurately predicted that Franklin Roosevelt would carry every state but Maine and Vermont in the 1936 presidential election. He took the unusual step of placing a long distance telephone call every week to a politician he trusted in each non-southern state asking for frank assessment of where the race stood, and then placing additional long distance calls the week before the election. That it was

considered unusual for the campaign manager of an incumbent President to place a long distance call once a week shows us how far the technology of campaigning has changed in 60 years!

Use of Polls by Politicians

I have been observing how politicians use polls for more than 25 years first as a campaign worker from 1964 to 1972, then as a pollster with Peter D. Hart Research Associates from 1974 to 1981, as co-author of *The Almanac of American Politics* starting in 1971, and also as a journalist for the *Washington Post*, *US News & World Report*, and *Reader's Digest* since 1982. I have briefed candidates on poll results, and I have deduced from their campaign tactics what their poll results must have been and my deductions have often been confirmed.

How do politicians use polls? You might as well ask how politicians use air. Polls are part of the air politicians breathe. They are reported in newspapers and on television every day. The latest poll results come into their offices every noon as the *Political Hotline* rolls off the fax. Politicians have always been curious about what people think and have always sought to understand opinion; polls are one way to do so. Politicians would no more ignore them than Tip O'Neill would shut his ears to what Mrs. O'Brien and Mrs. Murphy were saying. But they should also be aware that polls can be misleading, just as Mrs. O'Brien could turn out to be a crank.

Wiser Usage of Polls

My impression is that politicians—and the journalists who cover them—use polls more intelligently than they did a generation ago. In politics as in physics, knowledge can be cumulative: politicians have learned from the mistakes, missteps, and misimpressions of their predecessors.

The first thing they have learned is that poll numbers have a spurious precision. In Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1960* much is made of the tides of opinion shifting one week to Nixon and the next week to Kennedy. White, like commentators writing during the campaign, fearlessly assigned causes to these effects. But the fact was that, with one exception, the rather small number of polls published during the campaign showed both Kennedy and Nixon with between 45 and 50% of the vote. Given the statistical margin of error, there may well have been no shift at all; this may have been an even race all along, and all the causes confidently assigned may have had no effect whatsoever. Even in the 1970s, journalists habitually said that a candidate had a "lead" of 1%. Now they report the numbers and margins of error, or simply say that the race is about even.

The proliferation of polls, sometimes lamented as a proliferation of locusts, has also aided understanding. It means that

Public Opinion Polling...

we no longer have to rely on one or two polls, but can see how particular numbers fit into a pattern and can judge whether one result is an outlier—the one out of 20 polls which theory tells us will be outside the margin of error. This is a useful reminder that we are producing hard numbers in an attempt to understand inarticulate and often evanescent feelings: the numbers are at best a clue to what people are thinking and how much they care.

The knowledge has also spread that opinions are held with varying degrees of intensity and commitment. Polls taken on referendum issues and in primary campaigns are a notoriously bad indicator of final results because voters typically start off with only a few bits of information, and the information and argument supplied during a campaign can utterly change the results. It is my impression that politicians and journalists have a much better understanding of this than they did 25 years ago, which helps compensate for what I think is a backward step in polling.

Personal vs. Telephone Interviews

A quarter-century ago, many surveys for candidates were conducted in-person. This enabled pollsters to ask more and more complex questions, to present respondents with a broader array of choices which could reveal priorities and nuances of opinion. But such polls were much more expensive and took much longer to conduct than telephone polls. Computer technology in the 1980s allowed instantaneous tabulation of results so that a pollster in Washington late at night could call from the phone in his bedroom and get the results even as the interviewers in Omaha were placing the last few calls to Alaska and Hawaii. Today almost all candidate and public polls are conducted by telephone, with some loss in quality accepted for great gains in speed and cost.

Beyond Political Campaigns

With better understanding of polls, politicians are less likely to use, or misuse, them in the crude ways of the past. While they will pay attention to voters' priorities among the issues, they do not automatically attach themselves to whatever is the number one issue of the day. Increasingly they understand that they can vote against a position supported by a large majority if that support is not strongly held or if most people do not consider the issue especially important; examples include the flag amendment and the minimum wage.

Increasingly, politicians are using polls intelligently by framing the issues not just for one campaign but over the course of a political career. They try to establish linkages between their stands on and priorities among issues and those of the voters. Very often this does not mean taking the popular side

on the number one issue of the day; though if that is the politician's stand and s/he is interested in the issue, that can be a good idea. Quite often it can mean concentrating on a third choice or second tier issues, framing them in a way that favors their stand and then working over the long term to achieve results. Bill Clinton's use of polling in the 1996 campaign cycle is a good example of listening to the voters and responding with solutions to some of their second tier issues, made easier by the fact that the range of solutions Clinton finds acceptable is broader than that of almost every other politician.

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The problem Clinton and his White House now face—and there is every sign that they continue to be concerned about voter opinion—is how to keep this notoriously distractible politician concentrating on these problems and how to produce results.

Here, there is still plenty of room for knowledge to accumulate: how to use polls not just for short-term political campaigning but for long-term societal governance. If anything, politicians, with their improved understanding and use of polls, have proved to be too responsive to public opinion in the short run, and have not learned how to understand opinion and frame issues for the longer run. The search for novelty and the alertness for sudden changes in opinion have led too many to ignore the ways in which American opinion has been stable over the long term, and emphasis on surface discontents has drawn too much attention away from an understanding of the stronger undercurrents of values and beliefs. Perhaps the next few years will provide some useful lessons.

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