

THE TRIALS OF ELECTION POLLING: ELECTION POLLS—1948 AND TODAY

By *Everett C. Ladd*

Robert Waller of the Harris Research Center in London assesses for us the sources of the extraordinary failure of the polls in Britain last month to read correctly where the electorate was headed in its April 9 vote. The composite picture provided by the 5 major national polls conducted and published just prior to the balloting showed the Labour party narrowly ahead—but in fact the Conservatives compiled a margin of nearly 8 percentage points over Labour. It's arguable that systematically conducted surveys had never before missed the mark so badly in a major national election.

Drawing on the survey findings, most British analysts had predicted a "hung Parliament" with Labour putting together a coalition government. Instead, the Conservatives not only won a comfortable absolute majority in the House of Com-

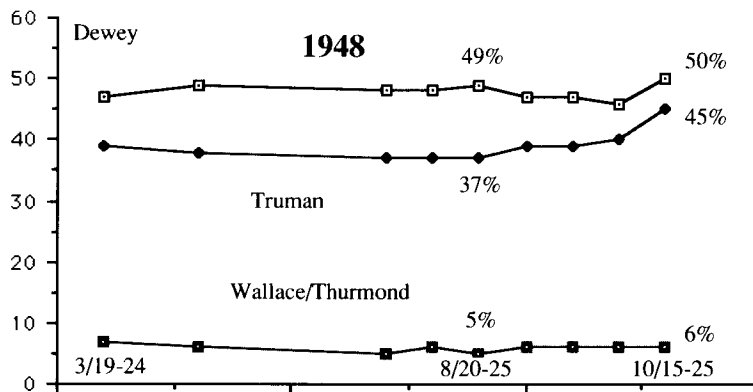
mons, but they did so by getting a popular vote plurality which stands on the high side in modern British experience. Their margin over their principal opposition this time was the fourth largest compiled by the winning party in the 14 British general elections since World War II. It was surpassed only in the Labour victory of 1945 and in the Thatcher landslides of 1983 and 1987.

If the big failure of polls in the UK last month was a one-of-a-kind happening, it should prompt curiosity, perhaps some amusement, and little more. But while it was more spectacular, the 1992 British miss is only the latest in a stream of election polling "errors." Just last February, the Republican primary exit polls badly underestimated George Bush's vote and suggested that the President and Patrick Buchanan were closely splitting the vote in New Hampshire, when in fact

Bush won comfortably. In the last issue of *Public Perspective*, Warren Mitofsky, executive director of Voter Research & Surveys, the four-network consortium which is the leading exit poller, described the New Hampshire performance as, in the history of the election day surveys, unusually wide of the mark.

Two years ago, the polls taken in the New York City mayoralty race and the Virginia gubernatorial contest—both the late pre-election surveys and the exit polls—misread where voters were headed. They showed Democrat David Dinkins winning handily in New York; he actually bested Republican Rudolph Giuliani by just two percentage points. Similarly, late polls put Democrat Douglas Wilder well ahead of Republican Marshall Coleman in Virginia. In fact, the race ended as a virtual dead heat.

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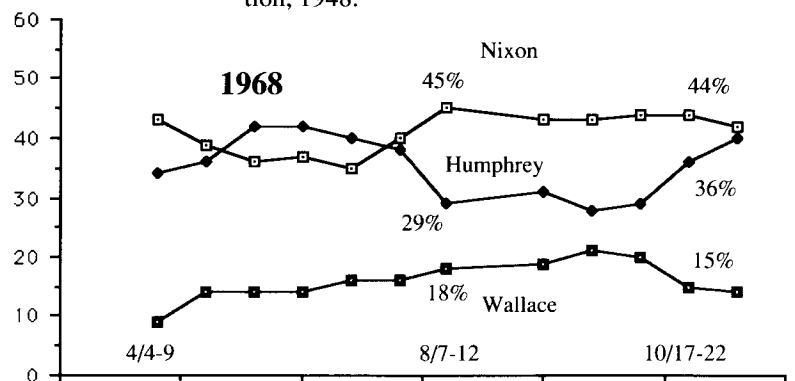


Question: If the presidential election were being held today, which candidate would you vote for—Nixon, the Republican; Humphrey, the Democrat; or Wallace, the candidate of the American Independent Party?

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, 1968.

Questions: If a presidential election were being held today, and Harry Truman were running for President on the Democratic ticket against Thomas Dewey on the Republican ticket and against Henry Wallace on a third party ticket, how would you vote? If the presidential election were being held today, how would you vote—for Harry Truman, Thomas Dewey, Henry Wallace, or for J. Strom Thurmond?

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, 1948.



Ladd-Election Polls—1948 and Today—Continued from page 24.

It may be that in each of these instances some special circumstance intruded to make the polling problem unusually difficult. I suspect, though, that there are underlying commonalities in the troubles election polls have been having; and that for all the improvements in methods the general environment for election polling now makes the enterprise far more difficult and demanding than it was in the past, in, say, 1948.

I mention 1948 specifically because the polling failure that year has entered popular mythology as the greatest ever. It wasn't, in fact, and what went wrong that year was easy to correct. Our present problems are, I believe, vastly more challenging.

It is true, of course, that all the polls taken in 1948 put Thomas Dewey ahead of Harry Truman. But as the data on the 1948 poll performance which we bring

together here (pp. 24, 27-28) attest, their findings never justified proclamations of a Dewey victory. Gallup and Crossley both underestimated Truman's percentage of the popular vote by about 5 points. But Crossley did his final interviewing in mid October! Gallup concluded just a bit later—two weeks before the election. Had Gallup stopped polling in 1968 at the same point he did in 1948, his 1968 "prediction" would have been far off.

In 1948 Gallup found Dewey's margin declining—from 12 points to just 5—from August to October. Any reasonable interpretation would have considered the possibility that the Democrat—whose party had controlled the White House since the depths of the Great Depression—might have gained further strength as election day approached and the vote became a real "priced" choice. Surely some voters, while dissatisfied with Truman and ready for a change after six-

teen years of Democratic rule, must have wondered whether they dared take a chance on "those Republicans." Survey findings available before the election made abundantly clear that the country was still in a policy era favorable to the Democratic party: The New Deal was broadly viewed as a success; a majority of Americans still favored more government (p. 28).

The "polling error" in 1948 of which we can be certain was one of judgment and interpretation: Failing to take into account what I think should have seemed obvious even without 20-20 hindsight, that a 5-point or so Dewey lead in mid-October in a poll trial heat could not be projected to a Dewey victory in the actual balloting November 2.

Today, much more than naive misinterpretation of poll findings lies at the root of the election polls' problems. My colleagues and I at the Public Perspective intend to keep revisiting these challenges in the contemporary environment, and we encourage further research and analysis.

WHAT THE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL COMMITTEE SAID ABOUT THE 1948 POLL FAILURE

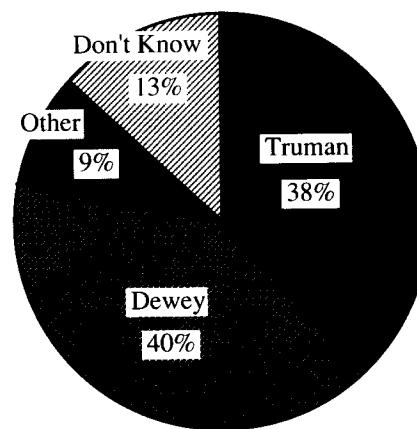
[Excerpts from Frederick Mosteller, et al, *The Pre-Election Polls of 1948* (New York: The Social Science Research Council, 1949), Bulletin 60, pp. 290, 301.]

The committee has made a study of available data on the 1948 election forecasts and has come to the following conclusions:

1. The pollsters overreached the capabilities of the public opinion poll as a predicting device in attempting to pick, without qualification, the winner of the 1948 presidential election. They had been led by false assumptions into believing their methods were much more accurate than in fact they are. The election was close. Dewey could have won by carrying Ohio, California, and Illinois, which he lost by less than 1 percent of the vote. In such a close election no polls, no advance information of any kind, could have predicted a Truman or Dewey victory with confidence. The failure of the polls was due to neglecting the possibility of a close election and the necessity of measuring preferences very accurately just before the election to determine whether a flat forecast could be made with confidence.

A...major source of errors in the 1948 election forecasts is to be found in the failure of the polls to detect shifts in voting intentions during the later stages of the campaign. Roper erred by assuming that voting intentions would not change during the campaign, as evidenced by his announcement of September 9. Crossley and Gallup made no attempt to detect the shift in voting intentions in the last two weeks of the campaign. Post-election polls report that about 1 voter in 7 said he made his decision on how to vote within the two weeks preceding the election, and that about 3 out of 4 of these voters said they voted for Truman. Even if one makes allowance for errors in such reports, one must conclude that failure to detect and measure changes of mind about voting during the closing days of the campaign accounts for a considerable part of the total error of the prediction.

One October 1948 Poll Showed the Election Close Indeed

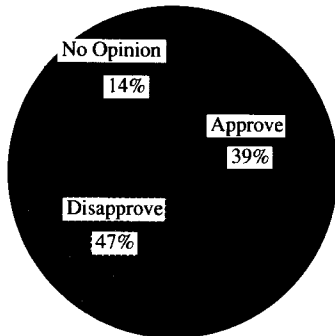


Question: Which candidate would you like to see elected President next month (November 1948)—Dewey, Truman, Wallace, or Thurmond?

Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, October 14-23, 1948.

THE 1948 POLITICAL CLIMATE

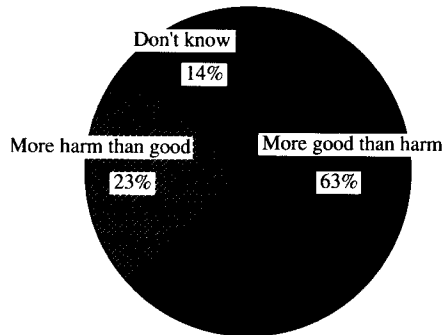
Truman's Popularity Low



Some Inclination to Change Horses

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Harry Truman is handling his job as president?

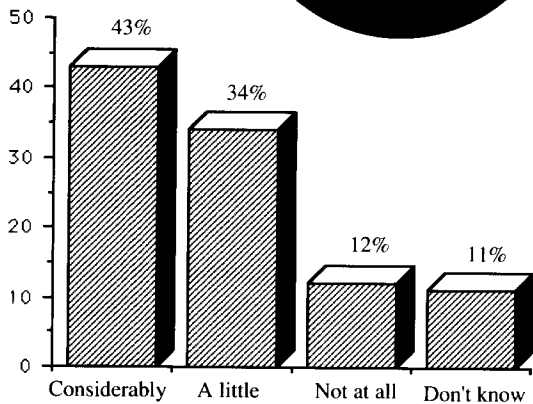
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, May 28-June 2, 1948.



But Overall, A Democratic Policy Era

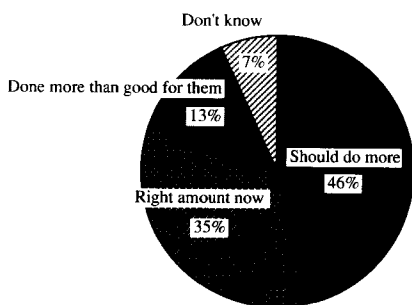
Question: Thinking back to the last depression, would you say that the New Deal measures under Roosevelt...on the whole did more good than harm or more harm than good?

Source: Survey by the Roper Organization, September 13-20, 1948.



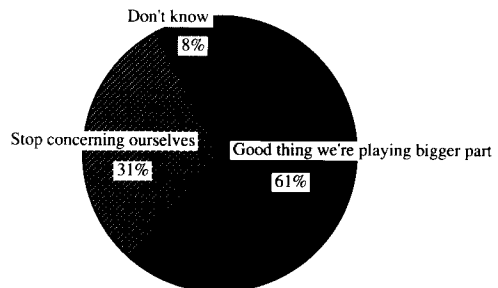
Question: Thinking back to the last depression, would you say that the New Deal measures under Roosevelt...lessened the severity of the depression on the people considerably, lessened it a little or didn't lessen it at all?

Source: Survey by the Roper Organization, September 13-20, 1948.



Question: ...Do you think the government should do more to improve the conditions of the poor people or that the government is doing just about the right amount of things now, or that the government has already done more for the poor people than is good for them?

Source: Survey by the Roper Organization, September 13-20, 1948.



Question: Do you think it is a good thing this country is playing a bigger part in world affairs now than we did after the first world war, or do you think that it would be better if we stopped concerning ourselves with foreign countries and paid more attention to our problems here at home?

Source: Survey by the Roper Organization, September 13-20, 1948.