



8 Analyzing and Interpreting Polls

Thus far, we have considered how public opinion surveys are conducted, how they are reported in the media, and how they influence elections and campaigns. This chapter focuses on the end products of public opinion surveys: the analysis and interpretation of poll data.

Interpreting a poll is more an art than a science, even though statistical analysis of poll data is central to the enterprise. An investigator examining poll results has tremendous leeway in deciding which items to analyze, which sample subsets or breakdowns to present, and how to interpret the statistical results. Take, as an example, a poll with three items that measure attitudes toward stem cell research. The investigator may construct an index from these three items, as discussed in Chapter 3. Or the investigator may emphasize the results from one question, perhaps because of space and time constraints and the desire to keep matters simple or because those particular results best support the analyst's own policy preferences. Another possibility is to examine the results from the entire sample and ignore subgroups whose responses deviate from the overall pattern. Again, time and space limitations or the investigator's own preferences may influence the choices. Finally, two investigators may interpret identical poll results in sharply different ways depending on the perspectives and values they bring to their data analysis; the glass may be half full or half empty.

The analysis and interpretation of poll data entail a high degree of subjectivity and judgment. Subjectivity, in this context, does not mean deliberate bias or distortion but simply professional judgments about the importance and relevance of information. Certainly, news organizations generally interpret their polls in an unbiased fashion. But biases and questionable perspectives can slip in—sometimes unintentionally, sometimes deliberately—as illustrated by a study released in 2015 about college and

university alumni perceptions of whether their education was worth the cost. The study, conducted by Purdue University and Gallup and supported by the Lumina Foundation, focused on the factors associated with alumni beliefs that their higher education experiences were worth the cost. Some of the findings were as expected; graduates who were more financially successful, had less student debt, and enjoyed greater career accomplishments were more positive about the value of higher education. The study also found that having supportive faculty while in school and a meaningful internship experience were also linked to positive views about the worth of higher education.

Thus, the Gallup/Purdue Index 2015 Report presented some interesting findings. But it was framed in a way that made colleges and universities less worthwhile and alumni less happy with their higher education experience. Many organizations and individuals (including myself) worried whether the tone of the report and the subsequent media coverage accurately reflected the results of the survey. The key survey item underlying the report asked respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statement that their college education was worth the cost along a five-point scale, ranging from agree strongly to agree to a middle category to disagree and, finally, disagree strongly. Overall, among all respondents from all types of colleges (including private for-profit schools), 50 percent strongly agreed, and another 27 percent agreed, certainly a strong endorsement of the worth of higher education. And among public universities, the results were even more positive, with 52 percent saying strongly agree and another 28 percent opting for agree, with a grand total of 80 percent agreeing that education was worth its cost. But the sponsors of the report, in their analysis, focused only on the “strongly agree” category. Thus, if 52 percent of public university alumni strongly agreed about the worth of higher education, that would mean that 48 percent did not strongly agree with that proposition. Indeed, the sponsors of the report used verbiage such as, “However, only half of the graduates overall (50%) were unequivocally positive in their response.” This makes it sound as if the respondents were unhappy with their higher education experience. This slant in the report affected media coverage. For example, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the reporter uncritically used the sponsor’s frame and wrote as her lead, “Only half of the 30,000 college alumni polled for the Gallup-Purdue Index strongly agreed that their higher education was worth the cost” (Blumenstyk 2015).

Sponsors of a survey can choose to focus on whatever response categories they wish. But more typically, with a five-point scale, the strongly agree and agree categories would be combined to indicate support, just as

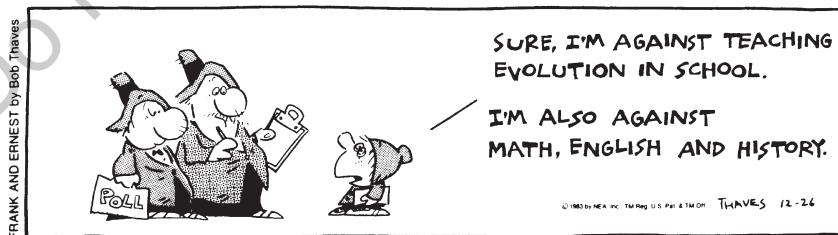
the disagree and disagree strongly categories would be collapsed together to indicate a negative opinion about higher education. It certainly sounds very different if only 50 percent (strongly agree) versus fully 77 percent (strongly agree + agree) of all respondents think college is worth the cost. APLU, the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities (2015), was dismayed by the tone of the Purdue/Gallup report and issued a press release that included the following:

Today's Gallup-Purdue Index findings underscore the value of a college degree at public institutions.

Many outlets have selectively reported the findings of the Gallup-Purdue Index, focusing only on the responses from the 52 percent of public institution alumni who 'strongly agreed' that their college education degree was worth it. The practical effect of this selective reporting has been a distortion of the survey's findings.

After including the 28 percent alumni who agree, a full 80 percent of alumni from public universities agree or strongly agree that their college education was worth the cost. Only 3 percent strongly disagreed and 5 percent disagreed with the statement that college was worth the cost. These are the numbers that today's prospective college students need to know: college graduates overwhelmingly report that higher education is a worthwhile investment of one's time, effort, and resources.

This example demonstrates how the analysis and description of poll results can give the public highly divergent pictures of what a poll means and what a citizenry is saying. Thus, this chapter will present several case studies to further illustrate the more subjective aspects of analyzing and interpreting poll results.



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Choosing Items to Analyze

Many public opinion surveys deal with multifaceted, complex issues. For example, a researcher querying Americans about their attitudes toward tax reform might find initially that they overwhelmingly favor a fairer tax system. But if respondents are asked about specific aspects of tax reform, their answers may reflect high levels of confusion, indifference, or opposition. And depending on which items the researcher chooses to emphasize, the report might convey support, indifference, or opposition toward tax reform. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is another highly complex subject that can elicit divergent reactions from Americans, depending on which aspects of the policy they are questioned about.

Health care reform (discussed in Chapter 6, pages 172–174) is also a very complex topic that requires multiple questions to capture the many facets of the issue. Some of the specific items discussed in Chapter 6 show strong support for aspects of health care reform; others show substantial opposition. Any poorly chosen subset of these items might present a distorted picture of where Americans stand on the issue. This is particularly worrisome for a topic like health care reform; many Americans do not closely follow the issue and may have major gaps in their information. Moreover, when citizens have incomplete information, the introduction of new information and arguments can dramatically alter preferences, as demonstrated by Blumenthal (2009) in a discussion of the individual-mandate feature of the health care debate. A Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll asked Americans about the individual mandate: “Would you favor or oppose requiring all Americans to have health insurance, either from their employer or from another source, with financial help for those who can’t afford it?” Sixty-six percent favored the requirement, and 31 percent opposed. Then the supporters were asked, “What if you heard that this could mean that some people would be required to buy health insurance that they find too expensive or did not want?” These erstwhile supporters now opposed the individual mandate by a vote of 73 percent to 21 percent. Likewise, the initial opponents of the individual mandate were asked, “What if you heard that without such a requirement, insurance companies would still be allowed to deny coverage to people who are sick?” Now the initial opponents of the individual mandate moved to a favorable position by a vote of 71 percent to 23 percent. Note how dramatically the distribution of opinions changed because of the follow-up questions: Initial supporters overwhelmingly moved to opposition, and initial opponents moved heavily to support. This kind of movement suggests attitudes on health reform are not fully developed and further suggests the need to delve more deeply by employing multiple questions to study the issue.

Some surveys go into great depth on a topic through multiple items constructed to measure its various facets. The problem for an investigator in this case again becomes deciding which results to report. Moreover, even though an extensive analysis is conducted, the news media might publicize only an abbreviated version of it, so the consumer of the poll results is at the mercy of how accurately the media portray the overall study. Groups or organizations that sponsor polls to demonstrate support for a particular position or policy option often disseminate results in a selective fashion that enables them to put the organization and its policies in a favorable light.

In contrast with in-depth surveys on a topic, *omnibus surveys* cover many subjects superficially in a single survey. Here, the problem for an investigator becomes ensuring that the few questions directed to a specific topic really do justice to that topic's substance and complexity. It is left to the consumers of both kinds of polls to judge whether they are receiving the central information on a topic or whether other poll items might yield different results.

The issue of prayer in public schools is a good example of how public opinion polling can be incomplete and potentially misleading. Typically, pollsters ask respondents whether they support a constitutional amendment that would permit voluntary prayer in public schools. In response, more than three-fourths of Americans say they would favor such an amendment. But this question misses the mark. Voluntary prayer by individuals is in no way prohibited; the real issue is *organized* voluntary prayer. Yet many pollsters do not include items that tap this aspect of the voluntary prayer issue. Will there be a common prayer? If so, who will compose it? Will someone lead the class in prayer? If so, who? Under what circumstances and when will the prayer be uttered? What about students who do not wish to participate or who prefer a different prayer?

The difficulty with both the in-depth poll and the omnibus survey is that the full set of items used to study a particular topic is usually not reported, and thus, the consumer cannot make informed judgments about whether the conclusions of the survey are valid. Sometimes, the sponsors of a survey will provide the complete report on request, and increasingly, sponsors are providing the entire survey and results on their websites. But most often, the typical consumer of public opinion polls will not do the extra work necessary to become more informed about the poll and its results and, instead, will simply rely on media coverage, press releases, and the like. Recognizing this, individuals should take a skeptical view of claims by a corporate executive, an elected officeholder, or even a friend that the polls demonstrate public support for or opposition to a particular position. The first question to ask is, What is the evidence cited to support the claim? From there, one might examine the question wording, the response alternatives, the screening for nonattitudes, and the treatment of "don't know" responses. Then, one

might attempt the more difficult task of assessing whether the questions used to study the topic at hand were really optimal. Might other questions have been used? What aspects of the topic were not addressed? Finally, one might ponder whether different interpretations could be imposed on the data and whether alternative explanations could account for the reported patterns.

When people cite poll results, they may be tempted to seize on those that support their position and ignore those that do not. The problem is that one or two items cannot capture the full complexity of most issues. For example, Gallup polls conducted in early May 2003 illustrate how important the selective use and analysis of survey items could be in generating rather different impressions on the issue of gay rights. Fortunately, the Gallup Organization asked a range of questions and presented the results of all of them in a fair and unbiased fashion (Newport 2003a; 2003b). Among the questions Gallup asked were the following four:

Q. Do you think homosexual relations between consenting adults should or should not be legal?

Should	60%
Should not	35
No opinion	5

Q. Do you feel that homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle or not?

Should	54%
Should not	43
No opinion	3

Q. Would you favor or oppose a law that would allow homosexual couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of married couples?

Favor	49%
Oppose	49
No opinion	2

Q. As you may know, there has been considerable discussion in the news regarding the rights of homosexual men and women. In general, do you think homosexuals should or should not have equal rights in terms of job opportunities?

Should	88%
Should not	9
No opinion	1

If one focused on the second and third items, one might describe American public opinion as sharply split on gay rights. If one emphasized

the first and last items, one would conclude that a substantial majority of Americans favor gay rights. Clearly, people promoting an agenda on the issue could easily select the items that favored their position. However, the Gallup Organization recognized that the attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights are multifaceted, requiring multiple items to capture the complexity of public opinion. Note that in 2003, Americans were evenly split on whether to allow civil unions, whereas, in 2015, a majority of Americans supported gay marriage, a level of support likely to continue to increase after the Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage. We will discuss the trends in gay marriage opinions later in the chapter.

The issue of government funding of faith-based initiatives further illustrates the importance of item selection and analysis in appreciating the complexity of popular opinion. A poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Research Center for People and the Press in March 2001 found that 75 percent of Americans favored government funding of faith-based initiatives that provide social services while 21 percent opposed the idea (Goodstein 2001; Morin 2001a). But support dropped dramatically when specific religious groups were mentioned as recipients of public money. Catholic and Protestant churches and Jewish synagogues still received substantial support at 62, 61, and 58 percent respectively, but Mormon churches, Muslim mosques, and Buddhist temples enjoyed the support of only 51, 38, and 38 percent of Americans. In addition, respondents expressed concerns about religions using public dollars to proselytize, about excessive government involvement with religious organizations, and about the fundamental issue of separation of church and state. Moreover, 78 percent of the respondents said that religious organizations that use government funds to provide social services should not be allowed to hire only people who share their religious beliefs. Thus, although there is widespread support—75 percent—for faith-based initiatives, there are important conditions and restrictions on that support.

Additional examples of the importance of item selection are provided by the polls taken to gauge Americans' attitudes about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the war with Iraq in 2003, and the war against terrorism in the post-September 11 era. Early in the first Persian Gulf crisis, various survey organizations, using different questions, asked Americans how they felt about taking military action against Iraq. Not surprisingly, the organizations obtained different results:

Q. Do you favor or oppose direct U.S. military action against Iraq at this time?
(Gallup, August 3–4, 1990)

Favor	23%
Oppose	68
Don't know/refused	9

Q. Do you agree or disagree that the U.S. should take all actions necessary, including the use of military force, to make sure that Iraq withdraws its forces from Kuwait? (*ABC News/Washington Post*, August 8, 1990)

Agree	66%
Disagree	33
Don't know	1

Q. Would you approve or disapprove of using U.S. troops to force the Iraqis to leave Kuwait? (Gallup, August 9–12, 1990; quoted in *Public Perspective*, September/October 1990, 13)

Approve	64%
Disapprove	36

Q. I'm going to mention some things that may or may not happen in the Middle East and for each one, please tell me whether the U.S. should or should not take military action in connection with it. . . . If Iraq refuses to withdraw from Kuwait? (*NBC News/Wall Street Journal*, August 18–19, 1990; quoted in *Public Perspective*, September/October 1990, 13)

No military action	51%
Military action	49

Note that the responses indicate varying levels of support for military action, even though most of the questions were asked within two weeks of each other.

The first question shows the most opposition to military action. This is easily explained: The question concerns military action *at this time*, and many Americans may have seen such a step as premature until other means had been tried.

The next two questions indicate majority support for military action, and the final item shows a very divided American populace. It is clear which survey items proponents and opponents of military action would cite to support their arguments.

Throughout the Persian Gulf crisis, public opinion was highly supportive of President George H. W. Bush's policies; only in the period between October and December 1990 did support for the president's handling of the situation drop below 60 percent. For example, a November 1990 CBS News/*New York Times* poll showed the following patterns of response:

Q. Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling Iraq's invasion of Kuwait?

Approve	50%
Disapprove	41
Don't know/NA	8

An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll in mid-November asked this:

Q. Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling the situation caused by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait?

Approve	59%
Disapprove	36
Don't know/NA	5

Some opponents of the military buildup tried to use these and similar polls to demonstrate that support for the president's policies was decreasing—earlier polls had indicated support levels in the 60 to 70 percent range. Fortunately, the *Washington Post* poll cited above asked respondents who disapproved of Bush's policy whether the president was moving too slowly or too quickly. It turned out that 44 percent of the disapprovers said "too slowly" and 37 percent "too quickly." Thus, a plurality of the disapprovers preferred more rapid action against Iraq—a result that provided little support for those critics of the president's policies who were arguing against a military solution.

In August 2003, the Gallup Organization (Newport 2003d) queried Americans about their views on aspects of American involvement in Iraq. Among the items in the survey were the following:

Q. How would you say things are going for the U.S. in Iraq now that the major fighting has ended—very well, moderately well, moderately badly, or very badly?

Very/moderately well	50%
Very/moderately badly	49

Q. All in all, do you think the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over, or not?

Worth going to war	63%
Not worth going to war	35

Q. Do you approve or disapprove of the way that George W. Bush is handling the situation with Iraq?

Approve	57%
Disapprove	41

Q. Do you think the Bush administration does—or does not—have a clear plan for handling the situation in Iraq?

Does	44%
Does not	54
No opinion	2

Q. Which comes closest to your view about what the U.S. should now do about the number of U.S. troops in Iraq—the U.S. should send more troops to Iraq, the U.S. should keep the number of troops as it is now, the U.S. should begin to withdraw some troops from Iraq, or the U.S. should withdraw all of its troops from Iraq?

Send more troops	15%
Keep as it is now	36
Withdraw some troops	32
Withdraw all troops	14

Fortunately, we have all of the above items to capture the complexity of American public opinion about the situation in Iraq. But clearly, very different portraits of public opinion could be generated if one focused selectively on only some of the items. For example, someone hostile to the Bush administration might focus on the fourth item, which indicates that a majority of the American people believed that the Bush administration did not have a clear plan for handling the situation in Iraq. A proponent of the Bush administration might focus on the second and third questions, which show that healthy majorities of Americans thought it was worthwhile to go to war with Iraq and approved the president's handling of the situation. Another observer might emphasize the first and last items and write that Americans were sharply divided on Iraq.

In September 2006, a poll of 1,150 Iraqi adults was conducted for WorldPublicOpinion.org by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Among the many questions asked Iraqis were the following four items:

Q. Do you think that the new Iraqi system of government grants the central government too much power, too little power, or about the right amount of power?

Too much	37%
About right	26
Too little	35

Q. Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of:

	Very favorable	Somewhat favorable	Somewhat unfavorable	Very unfavorable
Osama Bin Laden	1%	7%	16%	77%
Al Qaeda	2	5	12	82

Q. Do you strongly approve, approve somewhat, disapprove somewhat or strongly disapprove of the following:

	Strongly approve	Approve somewhat	Disapprove somewhat	Strongly disapprove
Attacks on U.S.-led forces in Iraq	27%	34%	23%	16%

Q. Which of the following would you like the Iraqi government to ask the U.S.-led forces to do?

Withdraw all U.S.-led forces within six months	37%
Gradually withdraw U.S.-led forces according to a one-year timeline	34
Gradually withdraw U.S.-led forces according to a two-year timeline	20
Only reduce U.S.-led forces as the security situation improves in Iraq	9

Imagine that someone was an advocate, rather than an opponent, of American involvement in Iraq and wanted to cite Iraqi public opinion in support of his or her stance. Proponents of American involvement might cite the first two questions, pointing out that 61 percent (26 + 35) favor the Iraqi government having at least as much power as it does while overwhelming majorities of Iraqis are very unfavorable to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Opponents of American policy, on the other hand, would likely point to the last two items that show that 61 percent (27 + 34) of Iraqis approve of attacks on U.S.-led forces and 71 percent (37 + 34) would like American forces out of Iraq within a year. Clearly, one can paint very different portraits of Iraqi public opinion depending upon which survey items one emphasizes.

A Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll in July 2003 included a number of questions about how safe Americans felt since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (*Polling Report*, August 11, 2003):

Q. How surprised are you that there has not been another terrorist attack in the United States since the 9/11 attacks?

Very surprised	21%
Somewhat surprised	30
Not very surprised	27
Not at all surprised	19
Not sure	3

Q. How confident are you that U.S. intelligence agencies have now improved their procedures and will be able to prevent attacks like the 9/11 attacks in the future?

Very confident	17%
Somewhat confident	45
Not very confident	20
Not at all confident	13
Not sure	5

Q. Do you think another major terrorist attack in the United States will happen within the next three months, within the next six months, in the next one to two years, more than two years from now, or never?

Within the next three months	4%
Within the next six month	10
In the next one to two years	31
More than two years from now	17
Never	16
Not sure	22

Q. Do you think there are members of the Al Qaeda terrorist group in the United States today?

Yes	92%
No	4
Not sure	4

Q. Do you think America is doing enough to secure the country's borders?

Yes	35%
No	57
Not sure	8

How safe and secure do Americans actually feel? Again, emphasizing different questions will produce different portraits of public opinion. For example, 62 percent of Americans (17 + 45) are either very or somewhat confident that U.S. intelligence agencies will be able to prevent future attacks, but 62 percent (4 + 10 + 31 + 17) believe there will be another

major terrorist attack in the United States. Americans are split on whether or not they are surprised by the absence of another terrorist strike since September 11, but they are almost unanimous in their belief that al-Qaeda members are in the United States. The lesson of this and the previous examples is clear: Constructing an interpretation around any single survey item can generate a misleading description of public opinion. And sometimes, advocates of particular positions do that deliberately, using survey results selectively and misleadingly to advance their cause.

An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll conducted in June 2006 included the following items about prisoners being held at Guantanamo Bay by the United States:

- Q. Do you support or oppose the federal government holding suspected terrorists without trial at the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba?

Support	57%
Oppose	37
Unsure	5

- Q. Some people say that these prisoners should be given prisoner-of-war rights or charged with a crime so they can defend themselves at a trial. Others say POW status or criminal laws don't apply to suspected terrorists because of the risk if they were released. What's your opinion? Do you think the prisoners at Guantanamo should be given POW status or charged with a crime, or should be held without charges indefinitely?

POW status/charged	71%
Held without charges	25
Unsure	4

- Q. How confident are you that the United States is adequately protecting the rights of prisoners being held at Guantanamo: very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not confident at all?

Very confident	21%
Somewhat confident	45
Not too confident	17
Not confident at all	14
Unsure	2

- Q. Do you think holding prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay military prison has or has not damaged the United States' image in the rest of the world?

Has	62%
Has not	35
Unsure	3

Q. Do you think holding prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay military prison has or has not made the United States safer from terrorism?

Has	51%
Has not	45
Unsure	4

Imagine members of Congress arguing about American policy at Guantanamo. Proponents of the policy are likely to cite the 57 percent of Americans in favor of the policy, but opponents will cite the 71 percent of Americans who think that prisoners should be given POW status or charged with a crime. Proponents are likely to claim that 66 percent (21 + 45) of Americans feel at least somewhat confident that the rights of prisoners are adequately protected while opponents will cite the 62 percent of Americans who believe that our Guantanamo policy has damaged the image of the United States in the rest of the world. Again, the selective use of particular items can present a very misleading description of American public opinion.

In the political debate surrounding tax cuts in 2001 and 2002, people often cited poll results to justify various positions. And certainly, all other things being equal, Americans would prefer to have lower taxes, a position that Republican tax cut advocates routinely cited. In the first round of tax cuts in 2001, the Bush administration claimed that the projected multi-trillion-dollar surplus would allow the United States to have tax cuts, pay down the national debt, and shore up Social Security and Medicare. But even under those circumstances, tax cuts were not a high priority for Americans. For example, a February 2001 CBS poll asked Americans the following question:

Q. Some lawmakers are saying that there will be a budget surplus in the coming years. If that happens and you had to choose among the following things, how would you like the money to be used: (1) to cut income taxes, (2) to pay down the national debt, (3) to preserve programs like Medicare and Social Security, or (4) something else?

Cut income taxes	19%
Pay down debt	13
Medicare/Social Security	48
Something else	7
Combination (volunteered)	12
Don't know	1

As the economy weakened and projected surpluses turned into actual deficits, opponents of the various actual and proposed rounds of tax cuts

regularly cited poll results that showed that when tax cuts were paired against other public policy objectives, the desire for tax cuts declined markedly. For example, an NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government poll asked Americans the following in February and March 2003:

Q. What's more important to you, having the government provide needed services, or cutting taxes?

Provide needed services	66%
Cut taxes	31
Don't know	2

In some ways this is a flawed question, since “needed services” could mean starkly different things to different respondents. But the question is representative of the typical pattern of responses obtained when the question of services versus tax cuts is presented to Americans. In a similar vein, a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll conducted in late summer 2003 found that about 60 percent of Americans were unhappy about the president's request to Congress to provide another \$87 billion for the reconstruction of postwar Iraq and Afghanistan (although about the same proportion of the American public favored staying in Iraq). But when asked how the \$87 billion should be generated, a plurality (41 percent) called for the repeal of recently passed tax cuts.

The obvious point of the tax cut example is that an accurate portrayal of American public opinion must take into account not simply a preference for lower taxes but also the trade-offs that might be involved in any tax cut, particularly when the federal budget is under great strain. Clearly, to capture the complexity and conditional nature of citizens' views, multiple items must be used. And when that is done, then the results of the multiple items should be made public, even if partisans on either side of the issue would prefer that only the results that support their position become public.

Polling on American attitudes toward the nuclear arms negotiations with Iran conducted in March of 2015 again illustrate how important item selection can be in presenting a portrait of American public opinion. Consider the following four survey questions, the first two from an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll and the next two from a Pew Research Center survey:

Thinking now about the situation with Iran: Would you support or oppose an agreement in which the United States and other countries would lift major economic sanctions against Iran, in exchange for Iran restricting its nuclear program in a way that makes it harder for it to produce nuclear weapons?

Support	59%
Oppose	31%
Unsure	10%

How confident are you that such an agreement would prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons: very confident, somewhat confident, not so confident or not confident at all?

Very confident	4%
Somewhat confident	33%
Not so confident	26%
Not at all confident	34%
Unsure	3%

From what you know, do you approve or disapprove of the United States negotiating directly with Iran over the issue of its nuclear program?

Approve	49%
Disapprove	40%
Unsure	11%

In your view, who should have the final authority for approving any nuclear agreement between the United States and Iran: Congress or President Obama?

Congress	62%
President Obama	29%
Depends (volunteered)	4%
Unsure	5%

The first two questions (from the ABC/*Washington Post* poll) are fascinating since they appear to be saying negotiate (by a 59 to 31 vote) but are also saying that 60 percent (26 + 34) of Americans have little to no confidence that any agreement will keep Iran from getting nuclear weapons. The first and third questions seem to indicate differing levels of support for the negotiations. One could argue that the first question is too argumentative in favor of negotiations and that the third question is a better measure of popular sentiment. The fourth question makes it clear that by a substantial margin, Americans want Congress (and not President Obama) to have the final authority to approve any agreement. If you were the White House press secretary, how would you spin the results to these four questions?

Two polls about ISIS again illustrate the complexity of American public opinion and how different narratives can be constructed depending on which survey items are emphasized and how they are interpreted. A CBS News poll conducted in early October of 2014 included the following items:

Do you think the militant group ISIS is a threat to the security of the United States, or not? If yes: Do you think it is a major threat or a minor threat?

Yes. A major threat	61%
Yes. A minor threat	21%
Not a threat	14%
Unsure	4%

Do you think President Obama has a clear plan for dealing with ISIS militants, or not?

Yes	36%
No	56%
Unsure	8%

Do you favor or oppose U.S. airstrikes against ISIS militants in Iraq? In Syria?

Yes	73% (Iraq)	72% (Syria)
No	21%	20%
Unsure	7%	8%

Do you favor or oppose the U.S. sending ground troops into Iraq or Syria to fight ISIS militants?

Favor	44%
Oppose	50%
Unsure	5%

Do you think the United States will be able to remove the threat from ISIS militants using airstrikes alone, or do you think ground troops will be necessary in order to remove the threat from ISIS militants?

Airstrikes alone	21%
Ground troops necessary	65%
Unsure	15%

Do you think it is necessary for Congress to approve military action against ISIS militants in Syria, or do you think President Obama has the authority to take military action against ISIS militants in Syria without getting approval of Congress?

Necessary for Congress to approve	62%
President Obama has the authority	33%
Unsure	5%

What conclusions can we draw from these results? Sixty-one percent of Americans think ISIS is a major threat, with another 21 percent believing

ISIS is a minor threat. A majority (56 percent) of Americans do not think that President Obama has a clear plan for dealing with ISIS, and an even larger majority (62 percent) thinks that the president needs congressional approval to take military action. Americans overwhelmingly support airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, but only 21 percent believe that airstrikes alone can get the job done, whereas 65 percent state that ground troops will be necessary. But 50 percent oppose the United States sending ground troops, with 44 percent favoring such a move. What are the American people saying here? What conclusions can we draw from the responses to this cluster of questions? Perhaps the best summary is the obvious one: Americans are not happy with the way things are going and are critical of the president. But they have not yet coalesced around an alternative beyond the bombing campaign, which they do not believe will be sufficient.

Fourteen months later, in late November and early December of 2015, CNN/ORC polled Americans about ISIS. (Note that the interviews were conducted after the Paris terrorist strikes but prior to the San Bernardino attack.) Four questions asked in the CNN/ORC poll were as follows:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling ISIS, the Islamic militant group that controls some areas of Iraq and Syria?

Approve	33%
Disapprove	64%
No opinion	4%

Now here are a few questions about the Islamic militant group often referred to as ISIS that controls some areas of Iraq and Syria. . . . As you may know, the U.S. has conducted air strikes against ISIS forces in Iraq and in Syria and has special forces troops on the ground in both countries to advise and assist in fighting ISIS, but there are no U.S. combat troops fighting ISIS forces in either country. In general, how would you say things are going for the U.S. in its military action against ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria—very well, moderately well, moderately badly or very badly?

Very well	5%
Moderately well	33%
Moderately badly	35%
Very badly	25%
No opinion	2%

Overall, do you think the U.S. Military response to ISIS has been too aggressive, not aggressive enough or about right?

Too aggressive	4%
Not aggressive enough	68%
About right	26%

Do you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops into combat operations against ISIS forces in Iraq or Syria?

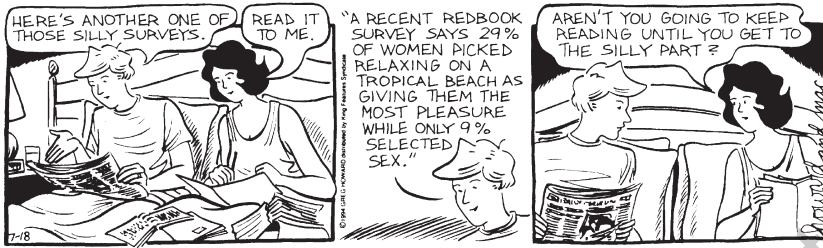
Favor	53%
Oppose	45%
No opinion	2%

Once again, like fourteen months earlier, the public is very critical of how the president is handling ISIS. Sixty percent (35 + 25) of the respondents think the military action against ISIS is going moderately or very badly, and 68 percent believe that the military response to ISIS has not been aggressive enough, yet only a small majority of Americans (53 percent) favor sending ground troops into combat operations. (Perhaps if this poll had been conducted after the San Bernardino massacre, more Americans would have favored using ground troops.) Like the poll a year earlier, Americans are unhappy with the policies in place, but they have not yet coalesced around alternatives. One thing is clear: One must exercise caution in arriving at definitive conclusions. An online story about this poll by CNN polling director Jennifer Agiesta was headlined (not Agiesta's fault) "Poll: Most Americans Say Send Ground Troops to Fight ISIS." Fifty-three percent is not most; it is a bare majority. And when one takes into account sampling error, it may be the case that the true percentage is less than 50 percent.

One of the anomalies of the 1996 and 2006 elections was the substantial number of Americans who were worried about the health of the economy at a time when many objective indicators suggested the economy was performing very well. Part of the answer to this puzzle was Americans' ignorance and misinformation about the country's economic health. For example, even though unemployment was substantially lower in 1996 than in 1991, 33 percent of Americans thought that it was higher, and 28 percent thought it was the same. The average estimate of the unemployment rate was 20.6 percent, when in reality it was just over 5 percent. Americans' perceptions of inflation and the deficit were similar; in each case, people thought that it was much worse than it actually was. It is no wonder that many Americans expressed feelings of economic insecurity during good economic times: They were not aware of how strongly the economy was performing (Morin and Berry 1996). In 2015, prior to the terrorists attacks in Paris, San Bernardino, and elsewhere, the economy was once again the number-one issue, despite all of the positive indicators, such as falling unemployment rates, falling home foreclosure rates, a surging stock market, rising home sales and prices, lower gasoline prices, low inflation rates, and others. But there other indicators that were not so positive, and political elites were stressing the shortcomings of the American economy, such as low wage growth, the shrinking of the middle class, fears about job security, underemployment, and others. Thus, if one were to

survey the American population about their views of the health of the economy, one would need to ask specific questions about different aspects of the economy even as one also asked overarching questions about its performance.

Sometimes, it is tempting to speculate broadly about citizens' opinions and policy preferences based on their responses to particular survey items. In many cases, the speculations and projections would be incorrect, but only additional polling questions would confirm the mistake. For example, in 1999, a survey conducted for CNN/USA Today by the Gallup Organization asked Americans, "Do you support the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy on homosexuality in the military?" Fifty percent of the respondents said they supported the policy, and 46 percent opposed it, suggesting a sharply divided citizenry, with only the barest majority in favor of letting gays serve openly in the military. Fortunately, the survey posed a follow-up question to the 46 percent who opposed "don't ask, don't tell": "Do you oppose it because you think homosexuals should be able to serve openly in the military, or because you believe homosexuals should not be able to serve in the military under any circumstances?" In response to this question, the 46 percent broke down into 35 percent who said that gays should be able to serve openly, 8 percent who said they should never be able to serve, and 3 percent who cited no reason for their stance. Inclusion of the second item revealed a portrait of American public opinion that is much more supportive of gays serving in the military. A similar pattern emerged in a February 2010 Ipsos/McClatchy Poll on health care reform. When asked whether they favored or opposed "the health care reform proposals presently being discussed," 41 percent of Americans said favored, and 47 percent said opposed. With only this item, critics of health care reform might claim that a plurality of Americans does not want health care reform. But a follow-up question asked of the initial opponents to health care reform showed that the situation was more complicated. "Is [your opposition] because you favor health care reform overall but think the current proposals don't go far enough to reform health care; OR you oppose health care reform overall and think the current proposals go too far in reforming health care?" Of these initial opponents, 37 percent said they favored reform but did not believe that the proposals went far enough, while 54 percent opposed reform and thought the proposals went too far. Here is a case where more than a third of the opponents would move to support if the reform proposals were stronger, certainly not what critics of health care reform wanted to hear. Of course, if the proposed reforms were strengthened, some of the initial supporters would be converted to opponents. This example again illustrates problems inherent in accurately portraying American public opinion on an issue as complicated as health care reform.



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Two polls on abortion demonstrate that while support for the practice of abortion may have weakened in recent years, one cannot conclude that citizens are therefore more likely to favor legally restricting it. A 2000 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that more than half of the respondents thought abortion should be either totally illegal or legal only in cases of rape, incest, or when the mother's life is in danger (Rubin 2000). Yet more than two-thirds said the decision to have an abortion should be left to the woman and her doctor. Even among the 57 percent of respondents who believed abortion to be murder, more than half agreed that the decision to have an abortion should be left to the woman. A 1998 *Columbus Dispatch* poll of Ohioans obtained similar results (Rowland 1998). Only 27 percent of Ohioans believed that abortion should be generally available; 15 percent said that it should be available but under stricter limits; 43 percent said that abortion should be against the law except in cases involving rape, incest, and the life of the mother; and 15 percent believed that abortion should not be permitted at all. Moreover, 51 percent of the respondents believed that abortion was an act of murder. These results might suggest that Ohioans would support government action to limit or prohibit abortions, but that was not the case. Ohioans were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "Even in cases where I might think abortion is the wrong thing to do, I don't think the government has any business preventing a woman from having an abortion." Fully 66 percent of respondents agreed with this statement, and only 27 percent disagreed. The lesson here is that one cannot presume to know citizens' policy prescriptions based on their opinions on an issue. Rather, one has to ask specific questions about both issue opinions and policy preferences. Some citizens do not like abortion but are unwilling to impose their views on others. Likewise, some citizens may reject gun ownership for themselves, but that does not mean that they would prevent their fellow citizens from owning guns. Some may oppose mercy killings and doctor-assisted suicides, but that does not mean that they support stiff criminal penalties to punish such actions.

In the past twenty years, there has been a major shift in Americans' general attitudes on the issue of gun control, with those who want to protect gun rights and oppose gun control citing their constitutional protections versus those who want more restrictions on the sale and purchase of guns citing public safety concerns. In the past, when Americans were asked to choose between two positions—"control gun ownership" versus "protect the rights of Americans to own guns"—solid majorities of Americans opted for controlling gun ownership. Since then, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of Americans supporting the gun rights position, such that a 2014 Pew poll (Kohut 2015) found that a majority of Americans—52 percent to 46 percent—said that protecting gun ownership rights was more important than controlling the ownership of guns. A Quinnipiac poll conducted in September 2015 obtained similar results. When asked, "Do you support or oppose stronger gun control laws?", 48 percent said that they opposed and 45 percent supported stricter laws. There were sharp partisan differences in the responses. Republicans opposed stricter gun control laws by a vote of 73 percent to 23 percent, Democrats supported such laws by a 76 to 16 split, and independents were more evenly divided—49 percent opposed and 45 percent supportive. On another indicator about attitudes toward guns—whether having a gun in one's home makes it safer or more dangerous—again, there has been a major change in favor of gun ownership in homes. In 2000, Americans felt that having a gun in one's home made it more dangerous rather than safer by 51 to 35 vote. In 2006, a plurality (47 to 43) of poll respondents said that guns made homes safer. And in 2014, Americans, by a more than two to one ratio (63 to 30) said that guns made homes safer.

Thus, the gun rights advocates have some good polling data to support their arguments on behalf of gun rights and against gun control. But the issue is not that simple. What do people have in mind when one gets down to the specifics of gun control? It turns out that there are many facets to the "gun control versus gun rights" political debate, and no single question or two captures the complexities of the debate. For example, in the same Quinnipiac poll mentioned above, respondents were asked, "Do you support or oppose requiring background checks for all gun buyers?" Here, 93 percent of Americans favored background checks, and only 6 percent opposed them. More significantly, unlike the gun control question discussed earlier, when it came to background checks, there were minimal differences among Democrats, Republicans, and independents: 98 percent of Democrats, 90 percent of Republicans, and 92 percent of independents supported background checks. Similar patterns held for laws designed to prevent people with mental illness from purchasing guns—88 percent of Americans supported such laws, and 9 percent opposed them. A 2013

Pew poll showed overwhelming support for background checks for private and gun show sales of weapons. Thus, public opinion has moved in the direction of protecting gun rights and believing that guns enhance safety at home. Yet there are huge majorities of Americans who believe in placing some restrictions and conditions on the sale and purchase of guns. These contrasting positions are not logically inconsistent. Indeed, in a rational world, it would be possible to advocate for both gun rights and gun restrictions. But this is one of those issues on which public officials hear only the polls they want to hear.

The final example in this section focuses on how the news media select what citizens learn about a poll, even when the complete poll and analyses are readily available. *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey*, by Robert T. Michael and others, was published in 1994, along with a more specialized and comprehensive volume, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*, by Edward O. Laumann, Michael, and John H. Gagnon. Both books are based on an extensive questionnaire administered by the National Opinion Research Center to 3,432 scientifically selected respondents, a genuine public opinion survey on sexual behavior, unlike the sex pseudopolls discussed in Chapter 1.

Because of the importance of the subject matter and because sex sells, media coverage of the survey was widespread. How various news organizations reported the story indicates how much leeway the media have in selecting which findings to emphasize and therefore determining what citizens learned about the research. For example, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story on October 7, 1994, titled “Sex in America: Faithfulness in Marriage Thrives After All.” Less prominent stories appeared in subsequent issues, including one on October 18, 1994, inaccurately titled “Gay Survey Raises a New Question.”

Two of the three major newsmagazines at that time featured the sex survey on the covers of their October 17, 1994, issues. The *Time* cover simply read, “Sex in America: Surprising News From the Most Important Survey Since the Kinsey Report.” The *U.S. News and World Report* cover was more risqué, showing a partially clad man and woman in bed; it read, “Sex in America: A Massive New Survey, the Most Authoritative Ever, Reveals What We Do Behind the Bedroom Door.” In contrast, *Newsweek* simply ran a two-page story with the lead, “Not Frenzied, but Fulfilled. Sex: Relax. If you do it—with your mate—around twice a week, according to a major new study, you basically wrote the book of love.”

Other magazines and newspapers also reported on the survey in ways geared to their readership. The November issue of *Glamour* featured the survey on its cover with the teaser, “Who’s doing it? And how? MAJOR U.S. SEX SURVEY.” The story that followed was written by the authors of

the book. The cover of the November 15, 1994, issue of *The Advocate* read, “What That Sex Survey Really Means,” and the story focused largely on what the survey had to say about the number of gays and lesbians in the population. The lead stated, “10%: Reality or Myth? There’s little authoritative information about gays and lesbians in the landmark study *Sex in America*—but what there is will cause big trouble.” Finally, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a weekly newspaper geared to college and university personnel, in its October 17, 1994, issue headlined its story, “The Sex Lives of Americans. Survey That Had Been Target of Conservative Attacks Produces Few Startling Results.”

Both books about the survey contain a vast amount of information and a large number of results and findings. Although most of the media coverage cited above was accurate in reporting the actual survey results, it also was selective in focusing on the more titillating parts of the survey, an unsurprising outcome given the need to satisfy their readers.

Examining Trends with Polling Data

Researchers often use polling data to describe and analyze trends. To study trends, a researcher must ensure that items relating to the topic under investigation are included in multiple surveys conducted at different times. Ideally, the items should be identically worded. But even when they are, serious problems of comparability can make trend analysis difficult. Identically worded items may not mean the same thing or provide the same stimulus to respondents over time because social and political changes in society have altered the meaning of the questions. For example, consider this question:

- Q. Some say that the civil rights people have been trying to push too fast. Others feel they haven’t pushed fast enough. How about you? Do you think that civil rights leaders are trying to push too fast, are going too slowly, or are they moving at about the right speed?

The responses to this item can be greatly influenced by the goals and agenda of the civil rights leadership at the time of the survey. A finding that more Americans think that the civil rights leaders are moving too fast or too slowly may reflect not a change in attitude from past views about civil rights activism but a change in the civil rights agenda itself. In this case, follow-up questions designed to measure specific components of the civil rights agenda are needed to help define the trend.

As another example of the importance of context in assessing the significance of a trend, consider the following question:

- Q. How much of the time do you think you can trust government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

Responses to this question over time had shown a substantial decline in trust from the mid-1960s to 1980, a leveling off in the 1980s, an increase in trust in the 1990s, and a sharp increase in trust after the terrorist attacks of September 2001. But what did this post-9/11 spike in trust really mean? Both Langer (2002) and Bishop (2002) argue that the meaning of the question changed after the terrorist attack—that citizens were now responding to a question that implicitly asked how much they trusted the federal government in matters of defense and national security, whereas, in the past, they had answered the question in the context of social and domestic programs. Indeed, as the events of 9/11 became more distant, and politics in Washington returned to “normal,” trust in government once again declined.

In addition to changes in the political environment, there are other obstacles to achieving comparability over time. For example, even if the wording of an item were to remain the same, its placement within the questionnaire could change, and that could alter its meaning (see Chapter 3). Likewise, the definition of the sampling frame and the procedures used to achieve completed interviews could change. In short, comparability entails much more than simply wording questions identically. Unfortunately, consumers of poll results seldom receive the information that enables them to judge whether items are truly comparable over time.

Two studies demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of using identical items over time. Abramson (1990) complained that the biennial National Election Studies conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, were losing their longitudinal comparability as new questions were added to the surveys and old ones removed. Baumgartner and Walker (1988), by contrast, complained that the use of the same standard question over time to assess the level of group membership in the United States had systematically underestimated the extent of such activity. They argued that new measures of group membership should be employed, which, of course, would make comparisons between past and present surveys more problematic. Although both the old and the new measures can be included in a survey, it becomes very costly if the survey must cover many other topics.

Two other studies show how variations in question wording can make the assessment of attitude change over time difficult. Borrelli, Lockerbie, and Niemi (1989) found that polls measuring Americans' political party loyalties in 1980 and in 1984 varied widely in their results. They attributed the differences to three factors: whether the poll sampled voters only;

whether the poll emphasized “today,” or the present, in inquiring about citizens’ partisanship; and whether the poll was conducted close to Election Day, which would tend to give the advantage to the party ahead in the presidential contest. The implication of this research for assessing changes in party identification over time is evident: To conclude that either of the two polls showed that genuine partisan change had occurred, other possible sources of observed differences, such as modifications in the wording of questions, must be ruled out. In a study of support for aid to the Nicaraguan contras between 1983 and 1986, Lockerbie and Borrelli (1990) argue that much of the observed change in American public opinion was not genuine. Instead, it was attributable to changes in the wording of the questions used to measure support for the contras.

Tom W. Smith’s (1993) critique of three major national studies of anti-Semitism conducted in 1964, 1981, and 1992 is an informative case study of how longitudinal comparisons may be undermined by methodological differences across surveys. The 1981 and 1992 studies were ostensibly designed to build on the 1964 effort, thereby facilitating an analysis of trends in anti-Semitism. But as Smith notes, longitudinal comparisons among the three studies were problematic because of differences in sample definition and interview mode, changes in question order and question wording, and insufficient information to evaluate the quality of the sample and the design execution. In examining an eleven-item anti-Semitism scale, however, Smith did find six items highly comparable over time that indicated a decline in anti-Semitic attitudes.

Trends in presidential popularity or approval are probably the most analyzed and reported of all standard polling items. This question has been asked for decades, which enables comparisons of presidential approval across administrations and analyses of subsets of Americans’ views, especially broken down by political party affiliation and self-reported ideological preference. When one examines presidential-approval scores, one should be examining the overall trends as well as major bumps and departures from these trends. These bumps may be due to a dramatic event, perhaps a foreign policy crisis in which Americans rally around the president or a domestic blunder that damages the credibility of the presidential administration. As Election Day draws near, the media give greater attention to presidential popularity as a harbinger of the likely election outcome. Certainly, in the 2010 midterm elections, many prognosticators cited the fact that President Obama’s less than 50 percent approval rating was another omen of the likely defeat the Democrats would suffer in 2010. The same held true for the 2014 midterm elections.

In addition to presidential popularity, pollsters and analysts often want to describe and explain changing American attitudes on a variety of public

policy issues. One such cluster of issues deals with the situation of gay and lesbian Americans and focuses on such topics as gays and lesbians serving in the military, gay civil unions and gay marriage, gay and lesbian adoption, and gay rights in the workforce. In the past two decades, polls have generally found growing support for gay rights in these areas. For example, Pew polls found that between 1999 and 2006, support for allowing gays to adopt rose from 38 percent to 46 percent of Americans while opposition declined from 57 percent to 48 percent, still leaving a slight plurality of Americans opposed to gay adoption. With respect to gays serving openly in the military, support rose from 52 percent in 1994 to 60 percent in 2006, whereas opposition dropped to 32 percent from its previous level of 45 percent. Other surveys have shown similar patterns. For example, ANES data showed support for gay adoption almost doubling from 1992 to 2008, going from 26 percent up to 51 percent. And support for gays in the military went from about 56 percent in 1992 to 71 percent in 2008.

One question that arises is, What are the processes by which Americans have become more supportive of gay rights? Is it because individual Americans are changing their views on these issues, or is it because more hostile older generations are gradually being replaced in the American population by more sympathetic younger generations? The answer, of course, is that both processes are happening. Indirect evidence for this is provided in the following Pew results presented by age groups:

Age Group	Gay and Lesbian Adoption				Gays in the Military			
	Favor (%)		Oppose (%)		Favor (%)		Oppose (%)	
	1999	2006	1999	2006	1994	2006	1994	2006
18–29	49	58	46	38	56	72	43	23
30–49	44	47	51	46	56	62	42	30
50–64	30	44	66	49	47	59	50	35
65 and older	21	32	75	62	41	47	50	39

Note that between 1994/1999 and 2006, all age cohorts became more supportive of gay adoption and gays in the military. Note also that for both issues, the youngest (eighteen to twenty-nine) cohort was the most supportive of pro-gay policies in both years while the sixty-five and older respondents were the most hostile. One plausible conclusion from these numbers is that as the oldest Americans depart the scene and are

replaced by younger citizens, support for pro-gay policies will continue to grow. The fact that all age cohorts became more gay-supportive suggests—but does not prove—that at the individual level, some attitudes were changing in a pro-gay direction. The most direct way to demonstrate this would be to have panel surveys (see Chapter 7) that would trace the opinions of the same individuals over time. But panel surveys are costly and time consuming and therefore not as common as cross-sectional surveys based on different samples of citizens interviewed over time. But if one does have multiple cross-sectional surveys done over time that include some identical questions and also measure the actual age of the respondents, then it is possible to conduct cohort analysis in which one follows the attitudes of groups of respondents over time. Imagine that one had polls conducted every five years between 1985 and 2010 on gay-related issues that also measured the actual age of the respondents. Then one could define age cohorts in 1985 and follow those same cohorts over time. For example, one might define one age cohort in 1985 as citizens between eighteen and twenty-nine, a second cohort as citizens between thirty and thirty-nine, and so on. In the 1990 poll, the eighteen-to-twenty-nine cohort would now be between twenty-three and thirty-four years old and in 1995 between twenty-eight and thirty-nine years old, and so forth. Or one could start with the 2010 survey, place every citizen in a cohort and work backward in time. The key point here is that following age cohorts of citizens over time allows one to draw some inferences about individual-level attitude change among the members of the respective cohorts and thereby enhances our understanding of the processes that produce the trends we observe.

Examining Subsets of Respondents

There is no necessary reason for public opinion on an issue to be uniform across subgroups. Indeed, on many issues there are reasons to expect just the opposite. That is why a fuller understanding of American public opinion is gained by taking a closer look at the views of relevant subgroups of the sample. In doing so, however, one should note that dividing the sample into subsets increases the sampling error and lowers the reliability of the sample estimates. For example, a sample of 1,600 Americans might be queried about their attitudes on abortion. After the overall pattern is observed, the researcher might wish to break down the sample by religion—yielding 1,150 Protestant, 400 Catholic, and 50 Jewish respondents—to determine whether religious affiliation is associated with specific attitudes toward abortion. The researcher then might observe that Catholics, on the whole, are the most opposed to abortion. To find

out which Catholics are most likely to oppose abortion, she might further divide the 400 Catholics into young and old Catholics, or regular church attendees and nonregular attendees, or into four categories of young Catholic churchgoers, old Catholic churchgoers, young Catholic nonattenders, and old Catholic nonattenders. The more such breakdowns are done, the quicker the sample size in any particular category plummets, perhaps leaving insufficient cases in some categories to draw solid conclusions. But such breakdowns often yield noteworthy findings. For example, a Gallup report (Newport 2005) revealed sharp differences on social issues among Catholics, depending on their frequency of church attendance. For example, only 20 percent of Catholics who attended church weekly viewed abortion as morally acceptable, compared to 54 percent among Catholics who seldom or never attended church. Likewise, 35 percent of regular church attenders viewed homosexual behavior as morally acceptable, compared to 63 percent of Catholics who seldom or never attended church.

Examples are plentiful of the advantages of delving more deeply into poll data on subsets of respondents. An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll conducted in February 1986 showed major differences in the attitudes of men and women toward pornography; an examination of only the total sample would have missed these important divergences. For example, in response to the question, "Do you think laws against pornography in this country are too strict, not strict enough, or just about right?" Ten percent of the men said the laws were too strict, 41 percent said they were not strict enough, and 47 percent said they were about right. Among women, only 2 percent said the laws were too strict, a sizable 72 percent said they were not strict enough, and 23 percent thought they were about right (Sussman 1986, 37).

Polls showed dramatic differences by race in opinions about the O. J. Simpson case, with blacks more convinced of Simpson's innocence and more likely to believe that he could not get a fair trial. For example, in a Field poll of Californians (*U.S. News and World Report*, August 1, 1994) only 35 percent of black respondents believed that Simpson could get a fair trial, compared with 55 percent of whites. Also, 62 percent of whites thought Simpson was "very likely or somewhat likely" to be guilty of murder, compared with only 38 percent of blacks. Comparable results were found in a national *Time/CNN* poll (*Time*, August 1, 1994): 66 percent of whites thought Simpson got a fair preliminary hearing, compared with only 31 percent of black respondents, and 77 percent of the white respondents thought the case against Simpson was "very strong" or "fairly strong," compared with 45 percent for blacks. A *Newsweek* poll (August 1, 1994) revealed that 60 percent of blacks believed that

Simpson was set up (20 percent attributing the setup to the police); only 23 percent of whites believed in such a conspiracy. When asked whether Simpson had been treated better or worse than the average white murder suspect, whites said better by an overwhelming 52 percent to 5 percent vote, and blacks said worse by a 30 percent to 19 percent vote. These various reactions to the Simpson case startled many Americans, who could not understand how their compatriots of another race could see the situation so differently.

In 2014 and 2015, there were numerous events that made racial concerns and race relations a more salient issue in the United States. The fatal shooting by police of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, as well as police shootings and mistreatment of black men, some of whom were unarmed, in 2014 and 2015, focused attention on police behavior and police–community relations. The massacre of nine black worshipers by a white man at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015 turned attention to the place of the Confederate flag in American society. Many polls were conducted in 2014 and 2015, some dealing with the broader topic of race relations in the United States and other polls addressing specific incidents and events. For example, a 2015 *Washington Post* poll presented respondents with two statements and asked them which of the two statements came closer to their own views. The statements were these: “Our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites,” and, “Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites.” Forty-four percent of white respondents agreed with the first statement; only 8 percent of black respondents agreed. Fifty-three percent of white respondents selected the second statement, compared to 90 percent of the black respondents. A Pew Research Center poll in July 2015 asked a sample of Americans, “How big a problem is racism in our society today? Is it a big problem, somewhat of a problem, a small problem, or not a problem at all?” If one combines the first two response categories together, one finds that white and black views do not differ that much. Eighty-two percent (44 + 38) of whites believe that racism is a big problem or somewhat of a problem, compared to 93 percent (73 + 20) of blacks sharing similar views. But if one focuses only on the first response category—racism is a big problem—one will observe much more pronounced differences between whites and blacks (44 percent versus 73 percent). Finally, a July 2015 *New York Times*/CBS News poll asked Americans, “Do you see the Confederate flag more as a symbol of Southern pride or of racism?” and obtained the following pattern of responses:

	Southern Pride	Racism
All respondents	51%	35%
Whites	57%	30%
Blacks	21%	68%
Southern whites	65%	24%
Southern blacks	15%	75%

Here, we see strong racial differences as to what the Confederate flag signifies. Blacks are more than twice as likely as whites (68 percent versus 30 percent) to link the flag to racism. And this difference grows when we further refine our subsets to include region. Now southern blacks are three times more likely than southern whites (75 percent versus 24 percent) to see the Confederate flag as racist.

Sometimes, the opinions of Americans differ by age. For example, consider the topic of physician-assisted suicide. A number of studies have shown that the older the age group, the greater the opposition to physician-assisted suicide (Rosenbaum 1997; Moore 2005). Another area in which age makes a difference is opinions about whether or not homosexual relations between consenting adults should be legal. A May 2003 Gallup poll showed that among eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old Americans, 66 percent thought homosexual relations should be legal; 33 percent disagreed. But among Americans sixty-five years and older, 39 percent believed that homosexual relations should be legal while 55 percent were opposed (Newport 2003a). There were also age differences in support for going to war with Iraq. According to a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, only 49 percent of Americans aged sixty-five or over favored going to war, compared with 60 percent of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds and 67 percent of thirty-five- to forty-four-year-olds. Indeed, Morin and Deane (2003) note that public opinion polling has often shown older citizens less supportive of going to war.

Even though there has been a substantial shift in favor of gay marriage among Americans, there remain groups of Americans who feel otherwise. A Pew Research Center survey conducted about six weeks before the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage found the following pattern of support and opposition among various groups to allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally.

	Favor gay marriage	Oppose gay marriage
All	57%	39%
18–34 years old	73%	24%
35–50 years old	59%	39%
51–69 years old	45%	48%
70–87 years old	39%	53%
White	59%	37%
Black	41%	51%
Hispanic	56%	38%
Postgraduate education	70%	24%
College graduate	68%	27%
Some college	56%	39%
High school or less	49%	47%
White evangelical Protestant	27%	70%
White mainline Protestant	62%	33%
Catholic	56%	38%
Unaffiliated	85%	11%

Thus, we can see that opposition to gays and lesbians legally marrying is most pronounced among the oldest age cohort, blacks, and white evangelical Protestants, the latter group being the most opposed at 70 percent. As we look at the age cohorts, we can reasonably project that with the passage of time and the replacement of older cohorts by younger age groups, overall support for gay marriage will continue to grow (unless somehow future young cohorts turn less sympathetic to gay marriage). The strong opposition to gay marriage among white evangelical Protestants helps us better understand the kinds of appeals certain candidates for office make as they try to win support from the religious right. Again, examining subsets of respondents helps us gain a deeper understanding of the structure, dynamics, and relevance of public opinion.

Two state-level polls on gun ownership and gun rights also demonstrate the importance of examining subsets of respondents. A 1999 Field poll asked Californians, “Which is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to impose greater control on gun ownership?” Overall, 64 percent of Californians said it was more important to control gun ownership; 30 percent opted to protect the rights of gun owners.

But an examination of responses by the respondent's party affiliation brought sharp differences to light, just as we saw in national polls discussed earlier in this chapter. Democrats cited controlling gun ownership over protecting the right to own guns, 79 percent to 16 percent. But 49 percent of Republicans thought protecting the right to own guns was more important, with 45 percent opting for greater regulation of gun ownership. Similarly, a 1999 poll conducted for the *Columbus Dispatch* revealed sharp differences by gender in response to the question, "Which one do you think is more important: to protect the right of Americans to own guns or to control gun ownership?" (Rowland 1999). Men divided evenly on this item, but 70 percent of female respondents thought controlling gun ownership was more important, compared with only 21 percent who gave higher priority to protecting the right to own guns. The *Dispatch* survey also reinforces an earlier point: One cannot assume how respondents stand on particular issues based on their positions on other issues. Small to sizable majorities of Ohioans supported a variety of gun control and gun safety measures. Ninety percent favored a mandatory waiting period to allow background checks; 70 percent favored registering handguns with the government; 86 percent favored child safety locks; 85 percent favored requiring handgun owners to attend a course on gun safety; and 53 percent favored banning gun shows where guns are bought and sold without much supervision and regulation. But 53 percent would favor legislation (with various safeguards) that would permit adults to carry concealed weapons.

In many instances, the categories used for creating subgroups are already established or self-evident. For example, if one is interested in gender or racial differences, the categories of male and female or white and black are straightforward candidates for investigation. Other breakdowns require more thought. For example, what divisions might be used to examine the effects of age? Young, middle aged, and old? If so, what actual ages correspond to those categories? Is middle age thirty-five to sixty-five, forty to sixty, or what? Or should more than three categories of age be defined? In samples selected to study the effects of religion, the typical breakdown is Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. But this simple threefold division might overlook some interesting variations—that is, some Protestants are evangelical, some are fundamentalist, and others are in the so-called mainline denominations. Moreover, because most blacks are Protestants, comparisons of Catholics and Protestants that do not also control for race may be misleading. The threefold division also overlooks a growing number of Muslims in the United States. And what about Americans who have no religious affiliation?

Creating subsets by ideology is another common approach to analyzing public opinion. The ideological categories used most often are liberal, moderate, and conservative, and typically respondents are assigned to these

categories based on their answer to this question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a liberal, moderate, or conservative?” But do people really assign common meanings to these terms? Do these terms oversimplify reality? Journalist Kevin Phillips (1981) cited the work of political scientists Stuart A. Lilie and William S. Maddox, who argue that the traditional liberal-moderate-conservative breakdown is inadequate for analytical purposes. Instead, they propose a fourfold classification of liberal, conservative, populist, and libertarian, based on two underlying dimensions: whether one supports or opposes government intervention in the economy and whether one supports or opposes expansion of individual behavioral liberties and sexual equality. They define liberals as those who support both government intervention in the economy and expansion of personal liberties, conservatives as those who oppose both, libertarians as citizens who favor expanding personal liberties but oppose government intervention in the economy, and populists as persons who favor government economic intervention but oppose the expansion of personal liberties. According to one poll, populists make up 24 percent of the electorate; conservatives, 18 percent; liberals, 16 percent; and libertarians, 13 percent. The rest of the electorate is not readily classifiable or is unfamiliar with ideological terminology.

The more elaborate breakdown of ideologies may be helpful to those seeking to better understand public opinion, but the traditional categories still dominate political discourse. Even so, citizens who oppose government programs that affect the marketplace but support pro-choice court decisions on abortion and proposed gay rights statutes cannot be easily labeled liberals or conservatives because they appear to be conservative on economic issues and liberal on social issues. Perhaps, then, they are best classified as libertarians.

Sometimes, the analytically interesting subsets are based on respondents’ knowledge and awareness levels. For example, opinions about the future of Social Security and Medicare are related to citizens’ knowledge about the two programs (Pianin and Brossard 1997). In one poll, the more people knew about Social Security and Medicare, the more likely they were to believe that the programs were in crisis and that major government action was needed. For example, among highly knowledgeable respondents, 88 percent believed that Social Security either was in crisis or had major problems; only 70 percent of respondents with little knowledge agreed. Likewise, 89 percent of the highly knowledgeable respondents believed Social Security would go bankrupt if Congress did nothing, compared with only 61 percent of the less informed respondents.

This finding raises some interesting normative issues about public opinion polls. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the methodology of public opinion polls is very democratic. All citizens have a nearly equal chance to be selected

for a sample and have their views counted; all respondents are weighted equally (or nearly so) in the typical data analysis. Yet except in the voting booth, all citizens do not have equal influence in shaping public policy. The distribution of political resources, whether financial or informational, is not uniform across the population. Polls themselves become a means to influence public policy, as various decision-makers cite poll results to legitimize their policies. But should the views of all poll respondents be counted equally? An elitist critic might argue that the most informed segments of the population should be given the greatest weight, but this stance would meet with great resistance among those with a more egalitarian perspective. We will return to the role of the polls in a democratic political system in the last chapter.

Interpreting Poll Results

After all is said and done, sometimes, reactions to poll results and their subsequent interpretation are functions of one's own underlying values and beliefs. For example, if a poll showed that 75 percent of Americans would allow their own children to attend school with a child suffering from AIDS while 25 percent would not, what would be the reaction to this finding? Some people might be shocked and depressed to discover that almost one-fourth of Americans could be so mean-spirited toward AIDS victims, when the scientific evidence shows that AIDS is not a disease transmitted by casual contact. Others might be reassured and relieved that three-fourths of Americans are sufficiently enlightened or tolerant to allow their children to attend school with children who have AIDS. Some people might feel dismay: How could 75 percent of Americans foolishly allow their children to go to school with a child who has AIDS when there is no absolute guarantee that AIDS cannot be transmitted casually?

Or what if a public opinion survey showed that 90 percent of white Americans would vote for a black person for president of the United States, but 10 percent would not. How might this response be interpreted? One might feel positive about how much racial attitudes have changed in the United States. A different perspective would decry the fact that in this supposedly tolerant and enlightened era, 10 percent of white survey respondents could not bring themselves to say they would vote for a qualified black candidate.

In neither of the examples just given can a single correct meaning be assigned to the data. Instead, the interpretation favored will be a function of the interpreter's individual values, beliefs, and purposes in analyzing the survey. This observation is demonstrated in an analysis of two national surveys on gun control, one sponsored by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and conducted by Decision/Making/Information, Inc. and the other sponsored

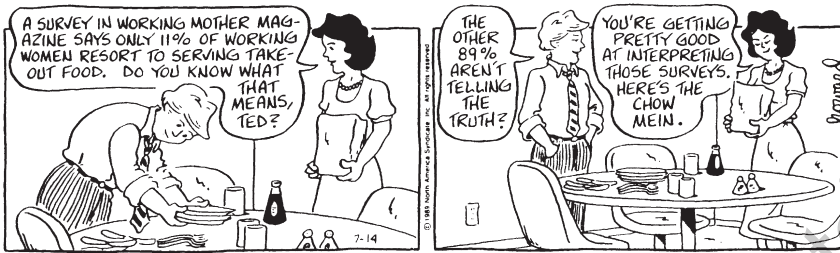
by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Handgun Violence and conducted by Cambridge Reports, Inc. (pollster Patrick Caddell's firm). Although the statistical results from both surveys were comparable, the two reports arrived at substantially different conclusions. The NRA's analysis concluded, "Majorities of American voters believe that we do *not* need more laws governing the possession and use of firearms and that more firearms laws would *not* result in a decrease in the crime rate" (Wright 1981, 25). By contrast, the center's report stated, "It is clear that the vast majority of the public (both those who live with handguns and those who do not) want handgun licensing and registration. . . . The American public wants some form of handgun control legislation" (Wright 1981, 25). Wright carefully analyzed the evidence cited in support of each conclusion and found that

the major difference between the two reports is not in the findings, but in what is said about or concluded about the findings: what aspects of the evidence are emphasized or de-emphasized, what interpretation is given to a finding, and what implications are drawn from the findings about the need, or lack thereof, for stricter weapons controls. (Wright 1981, 38)

In essence, it was the interpretation of the data that generated the difference in the recommendations.

Two polls on tax reform provide another example of how poll data can be selectively interpreted and reported (Sussman 1985a). The first, sponsored by the insurance industry, was conducted by pollster Burns Roper. Its main conclusion, announced at a press conference, was that 77 percent of the American public "said that workers should not be taxed on employee benefits," and only 15 percent supported such a tax, a conclusion very reassuring to the insurance industry. However, Roper included other items in the poll that the insurance industry chose not to emphasize. As Sussman points out, the 77 percent opposed to the taxing of fringe benefits were then asked, "Would you still oppose counting the value of employee benefits as taxable income for employees if the additional tax revenues went directly to the reduction of federal budget deficits and not into new spending?" Twenty-six percent were no longer opposed to taxing fringe benefits under this condition, bringing the overall opposition down to 51 percent of the sample.

A second follow-up question asked, "Would you still oppose counting the value of employee benefits as taxable income for employees if the additional tax revenues permitted an overall reduction of tax rates for individuals?" (That feature was part of the Treasury Department's initial tax proposals.) Now only 33 percent of the sample were opposed to taxing fringes, 50 percent supported it, and 17 percent were undecided. Thus, depending on which results are used, anyone reporting this poll could show a majority of citizens supportive of or opposed to taxing fringe benefits.



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The other poll that Sussman analyzed also tapped people's reactions to the Treasury Department's tax proposal. One poll item read as follows:

- Q. The Treasury Department has proposed changing the tax system. Three tax brackets would be created, but most current deductions from income would be eliminated. Non-federal income taxes and property taxes would not be deductible, and many deductions would be limited. Do you favor or oppose this proposal? (Sussman 1985a)

Not surprisingly, 57 percent opposed the Treasury plan, and only 27 percent supported it. But as Sussman points out, the question was highly selective and leading because it focused on changes in the tax system that hurt the taxpayer. For example, nowhere does it inform the respondent that a key part of the Treasury plan was to reduce existing tax rates so that 80 percent of Americans would be paying either the same amount in taxes or less than they were paying before. This survey was obviously designed to obtain a set of results compatible with its sponsor's policy objectives.

In August 2003, Zogby International, working with the *American Enterprise* magazine, conducted a survey of Iraqi public opinion that was asserted to be scientific. Within a week after Zogby released the survey, on September 10, the National Council on Public Polls' (2003) Polling Review Board issued a critique of the poll, claiming that it was not a scientific probability sample but instead simply a convenience sample, in which Iraqis were interviewed in only four cities (excluding Baghdad), in public places such as shopping areas and coffeehouses.

Whatever the merits of the sampling procedure, it is the interpretation of this poll that is most noteworthy. At the time of the poll, domestic criticism of President Bush's planning for postwar Iraq was growing in intensity. More and more Americans believed that matters were not going well in Iraq despite the conclusion of the formal war. American soldiers in Iraq were regularly being attacked, and it appeared that many Iraqis were angry at American policies and the American presence. When the results of the

poll were made public, supporters of the Bush administration claimed that they demonstrated that American policies in Iraq were going much better than the news media had been reporting. Indeed, Karl Zinsmeister, editor in chief of the *American Enterprise*, concluded his analysis of the poll with the admonition, “We’re making headway in a benighted part of the world, America. Hang in there” (Zinsmeister 2003).

Perhaps Zinsmeister was correct. But one would be worried about the accuracy of poll results that did not include respondents from the Baghdad area. More importantly, some of the interpretations given to the responses may be unduly optimistic. For example, in his article, Zinsmeister wrote, “Iraqis are optimistic. Seven out of ten say they expect both their country and their personal lives will be better five years from now.” A skeptic might respond that given the current situation in Iraq, of course Iraqis thought things would be better in five years; they certainly could not get much worse. Another item in the poll asked Iraqis,

Q. If you were asked to name one foreign country you would like Iraq to model its new government on, which one of the following countries would you choose?

Syria	11.9%
Saudi Arabia	17.4
United States	23.3
Iran	3.1
Egypt	7.1
Other	15.4
None	21.9

In reporting these results, Zinsmeister only considered Iraqis who selected one of the five countries specifically listed in the question and wrote that “the most popular model by far was the U.S. The U.S. was preferred as a model by 37 percent (23.3/11.9 + 17.4 + 23.3 + 3.1 + 7.1) of Iraqis.” But another way to look at these figures is to say that 23.3 percent chose the United States or, even more pessimistically, that when Iraqis were given the opportunity to cite the United States as a model for the new Iraqi government, 76.7 percent of them chose an alternative other than the United States.

Zinsmeister was also optimistic that Iraq would not turn into a fundamentalist Islamic republic. He wrote,

Perhaps the strongest indication that an Islamic government won’t be part of Iraq’s future: The nation is thoroughly secularized. We asked how often our respondents had attended the Friday prayer over the previous month. Fully 43 percent said “Never.” It’s time to scratch Khomeini II from the Iraq critics’ list of morbid fears.

Here Zinsmeister has clearly made a huge leap from the results of one survey question to the conclusion that there is no danger of an Islamic republic being established. Another question asked whether Iraq should have an Islamic government or whether the government should let everyone practice their own religion. About 33 percent preferred an Islamic government while 60 percent favored letting people practice their own religion. This question shows that one-third of Iraqis want an Islamic government, but it is not at all clear that letting people practice their own religion rules out an Islamic government.

It is obvious that Zinsmeister is using the poll results to encourage Americans to stay the course in Iraq. He makes very clear to the reader that he is writing as an advocate, as well as how he is using and manipulating the polling data. But two other articles about the poll, one in the *Christian Science Monitor* (Hughes 2003) and the other in the *Financial Times* of England (Dinmore 2003), illustrate how very different spins can be given to the same data. The *Financial Times* story was somewhat negative, with the headline, "Opinion Poll Underlines Iraqi Distrust of America." In contrast, the *Christian Science Monitor* story was much more upbeat about Iraqi attitudes toward the United States. At one point Hughes wrote, "Two-thirds of those polled urged that U.S. and British troops should remain for at least another year." This is very misleading since the actual question asked of Iraqis was, "Given a choice, would you like to see the American and British forces leave Iraq in six months, one year, or two years or more?" Thirty-one percent wanted them to leave in six months, and a total of 65.5 percent in a year. Clearly, this is not two-thirds of Iraqis urging that U.S. and British troops stay at least another year, but two-thirds of Iraqis wanting American and British forces to leave within a year.

When Polls Conflict and When Polls Surprise: Some Final Thoughts

Sometimes, consumers of public opinion polls are perplexed when different polls conducted on the same topic at approximately the same time yield divergent results. This is particularly the case for presidential election trial heat surveys, when multiple surveys conducted in close temporal proximity to each other occasionally show rather discrepant results. For example, in September 1988, seven different polls on presidential preference were released within a three-day period with results ranging from Bush ahead by eight points to a Dukakis lead of six points (Morin 1988c). In 1992, ten national polls conducted in the latter part of August showed Clinton with leads over Bush ranging from five to nineteen

percentage points (Elving 1992). In 1996, the final preelection polls showed Clinton leading Dole by margins ranging from seven to eighteen percentage points. In 2000, six polls released on October 26 showed outcomes ranging from a Bush lead of thirteen percentage points to a Gore lead of two percentage points. The final preelection polls in 2004, 2008, and 2012 showed a narrower range of outcomes. How can polls on an ostensibly straightforward topic such as presidential vote preference differ so widely? Many reasons can be cited, some obvious and others subtler in their effects.

There is a substantial body of literature that addresses the sources of poll discrepancies in particular election years (Dolnick 1984; Lewis and Schneider 1982; Lipset 1980; Traugott 1987; Voss, Gelman, and King 1995). Zukin (2004) provides a readily understandable overview of factors that help explain why different election polls conducted at about the same time may arrive at different results. Zukin first points out that discrepant results may simply be due to sampling error in the various surveys. Results that appear to be different might actually fall within the same interval when the sampling error is applied to the percentage point estimates. Using Zukin's example, if a poll with a four-percentage-point margin of error shows Obama ahead of Romney by 48 to 43, Obama's true level of support could range from 44 percent to 52 percent (at a certain level of confidence) while Romney's true percentage could range from 39 percent to 47 percent. Thus, Obama could be ahead by as much as thirteen points (52 percent to 39 percent) or behind by three points (44 percent to 47 percent). Zukin notes that sampling error can account for many of the disparities we see across polls.

Zukin then considers a number of technical decisions that pollsters must make that could help explain variations across different polls. For example, he notes that pollsters may use different sampling frames and different methods for selecting the actual respondents to be interviewed. There may also be differences in the timing of competing polls, just as there might be differences in field procedures, question wording and question order, and weighting methods. Different polling organizations may have different methods for identifying likely voters. There may be differences in how interviews are conducted, what kinds of callback techniques are employed, and whether efforts are made to convert refusals to participants.

Presidential polling discrepancies are probably easier to understand and explain than divergent results on issue and policy questions, particularly when these divergent results come from polls conducted during approximately the same time period. In addition to all of the factors listed above as explanations for discrepant election polling, one must give even greater attention to the potential effects of question wording and question

context as well as the treatment of nonattitudes and the possible consequences of differential response rates. Because poll consumers are likely unaware of the methodological and design differences among competing surveys, they often find it difficult to decide which poll results are the most compelling and how to reconcile conflicting results. I often advise friends, when they encounter disparate polls on the same topic, to take an average of the results across the polls to come up with the best estimate. But this advice only works when one is dealing with reputable polls; one would not incorporate unscientific polls with self-selected samples into my suggested averaging process. When multiple polls on the same topic yield similar findings, citizens should view those results with greater confidence. And when there is only one survey on a topic, citizens must hope that the substantive results obtained are genuine and not simply the product of methodological choices made in the polling process. In short, because, at times, it is difficult to separate the substantive interpretation of the polling data from the procedures that were used to collect the data in the first place, citizens will find it even more challenging to be informed consumers of polls.

Finally, there are occasions when poll results surprise us, perhaps when one learns that there are still some Americans who question President Obama's citizenship or his religious affiliation or that there are Americans who are skeptical about the moon landings or about who was really responsible for the 9/11 attacks in 2001. When such stunning results are obtained, we should not automatically assume that the poll is flawed. We might, instead, ask the question, What is it about the respondents that could yield such opinions? Academic colleagues of mine were very surprised when a 2015 Pew Research Center poll found that twice as many Americans thought the current Supreme Court was liberal rather than conservative—36 percent to 18 percent—with 39 percent saying that the Court was middle of the road. “How could this be?” one colleague sputtered. “What’s wrong with the poll?” He asked these questions because he knew in his heart of hearts that the Supreme Court was a very conservative Court. My speculative answer was immediate and probably correct. Two recent decisions that the Court had made on gay marriage and on the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) were described by the media as liberal actions. And given that most citizens know relatively little about the American judicial system, those poll respondents describing the Court as liberal may, in part, have simply been reflecting the dominant media descriptions of the Court at that particular time. My colleague was partially satisfied by that explanation, but then he blurted out, “What if respondents to a poll are not familiar with the topic of the poll? What are their answers worth?” I told him to read my book, especially Chapter 2.

Exercises

1. Review the survey examples in this book. Pick one example, and construct two very different interpretations of the same results. That is, write two very different commentaries about the identical set of results.
2. Assume that the job approval rating of President Obama was 45 percent in November 2015. How would you report this result? What commentary might you offer? In thinking about the various issues and context affecting this result, you may want to consult a national newspaper from that month. How might one judge whether that approval level is high or low? What kinds of comparisons might be helpful in making that judgment?

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