

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL
230 Park Avenue, New York City

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Polling analysis
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Prayer

The Committee of nationally known statisticians and social scientists appointed by the Social Science Research Council to study the failure of public opinion polls to forecast the 1948 election reported today that there is no evidence that the pollsters acted in bad faith, but there is much evidence of bad judgment. The polling organizations used inadequate methods, and were overconfident about their ability to do a difficult task with the usual polling methods.

The polling organizations failed to inform the public adequately about the limitations of their forecasts. They made flat predictions which gave the impression that the election was a mere formality to confirm a result already settled. Actually, they could have foreseen the possibility of a close contest and should not have tried to pick a winner in 1948 with certainty.

In an election as close as that of 1948, it is not possible to pick the winner with certainty, even using the best of techniques. Similar failures in picking the winner can occur in the future, since close elections are common. At least seven times in the past 26 presidential elections the successful candidate's margin of victory would have been too close for confident prediction by present polling methods.

The pollsters failed to anticipate a close election for two main reasons:

1. Their estimates of percentage division of preferences at the time of their polls were subject to substantial errors. These errors are traceable to methods of sampling and interviewing used.

2. Their forecasts of the vote were based on wrong assumptions about the late trend of the campaign. The campaign had two effects, tending to swing undecided voters to Truman and to shift voters to him directly from Dewey and from candidates of parties that split from the Democrats.

These shortcomings were aggravated by failure to take account of weaknesses of their methods and to alert the public to the possibility that the forecasts might go wrong.

The failure of these election forecasts has no bearing on the accuracy or usefulness of properly conducted sampling surveys aimed at determining existing facts without attempting to measure opinion or predict future action. Other tests are available to check the accuracy of such surveys, which, like good public opinion polls, serve highly useful public, business and scientific purposes.

After extensive study of the records of the three principal election forecasters, Crossley, Gallup and Roper, and of various state and local polls, the Committee concludes that the single 1948 failure should not destroy public confidence in polling. Prior to 1948 there was overconfidence for the wrong reasons. Now there is danger of an unwarranted distrust also for the wrong reasons.

Polls are important for understanding how the American democratic process works. The Committee has made a series of recommendations for improvements in method and fundamental research in social psychology and political science. The 1948 failure should have a wholesome long-run effect, if it leads to better appreciation of what the polls can and can't do.

The members of the Committee are:

James Phinney Baxter, 3rd, President of Williams College
 Philip M. Hauser, Associate Dean, Division of Social Sciences, University of Chicago
 Carl I. Hovland, Chairman of the Department of Psychology, Yale University
 V. O. Key, Professor of Political Science, The Johns Hopkins University
 Isador Lubin, Chairman of the Committee on Statistical Standards of the American Statistical Association
 Frank Stanton, President, Columbia Broadcasting System
 Frederick F. Stephan, Professor of Social Statistics, Princeton University
 Samuel A. Stouffer, Professor of Sociology, Harvard University
 Samuel S. Wilks, CHAIRMAN, Professor of Mathematical Statistics, Princeton University