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From *The Opinion Makers*

Using an example from 2004 and 2005 polling on Americans' attitudes toward oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, public opinion expert David Moore reveals the reason behind the sometimes contrasting results that different polls find on the same topic. Many people who respond don't know much about the topic being explored; many don't feel strongly one way or the other. Therefore, the poll results are "soft" and easily manipulated. Moore exposes several pitfalls in polling that can produce inaccurate data. The author then moves to a famous 2008 incident that brought a lot of attention to the issue of polling accuracy: the pollsters' prediction that candidate Hillary Clinton would lose the New Hampshire primary to Senator Barack Obama. Surprise! Clinton beat Obama by a couple of percentage points. Moore assesses where the polls went wrong, providing some important warnings for future polling efforts. He then takes on the polling-in-the-era-of-cell-phones controversy. Moore's concluding words address the need to acknowledge that many people do not feel strongly about an issue and that their opinions are easily swayed—even by the order in which questions are asked.

THE GREAT PROMISE of public opinion polls was not that they would be able to predict election winners, but that they would give voice to the people between elections. That at least was the hope of George Gallup when he launched "America Speaks" in the early 1930s, and it remains the universal vision of media pollsters today. The question from the beginning of modern polling, however, has always been the same: How well do the polls measure what people are thinking? Election predictions can be checked for accuracy against the electoral results, but there is nothing comparable against which to measure the accuracy of the typical public policy poll. Pollsters try to establish their overall credibility by demonstrating how well they can predict elections, the assumption being that if they are successful there, they must have good samples that represent the American public on more general policy issues. That's not necessarily a good assumption, of course, since even in election campaigns the polls are not especially reliable in describing the public mind.

Beyond the credibility of the pollster, there is another, though still

imperfect, way to assess the potential accuracy of a public policy poll—whether or not it agrees with other polls asking roughly the same question at roughly the same time. If they all agree, it doesn't mean they are all right. They could all be wrong in the same way. But if the polls disagree with one another, we definitely know that at least one is inaccurate. Comparisons over the past several years suggest some real problems with public policy polls, which are increasingly more likely to confuse than they are to enlighten us about what Americans are thinking.

One of the major problems is that opinions on public policy are more complex than those expressing a vote choice. A single question will rarely suffice, because there are so many facets of any given policy. Moreover, the policy may be so arcane, or the public so unengaged in the issue, that large numbers of Americans have no opinion about it at all—a fact that media pollsters generally do everything in their power to conceal. Rather than allow respondents to freely acknowledge they don't have an opinion, pollsters pressure them to choose one of the available options. Respondents in turn try to come up with some plausible reason for choosing one answer over another. If they don't have much information about the issue, they pick up cues from the way the question is framed or from other questions in the survey. The net result is that many respondents are influenced by the questionnaire itself.

An extreme example of how drastically polls can manipulate public opinion occurred shortly after President Bush's re-election, when he announced that he would try once again to have Congress pass legislation to permit oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). A national poll released by Republican Frank Luntz in January 2005, on behalf of the Arctic Power interest group, found a public that supported oil drilling in ANWR by a margin of 17 percentage points (51 percent to 34 percent). Yet in direct contradiction, a similar poll conducted December 13 through 15, 2004, by John Zogby for the Wilderness Society found the public opposed to oil drilling in ANWR, by the exact same margin (55 percent opposed to 38 percent in favor).

It seemed more than coincidental that the poll results happened to conform with the desires of the sponsoring organizations. And a look at the questionnaires shows how easy it was to shape the findings into mirror opposites. Luntz preceded his question on oil drilling with 13 questions that dealt with the cost of oil and with energy dependence on foreign countries. By the time the interviewer got to the question of exploring and developing oil reserves in ANWR, many respondents were primed to solve the country's energy needs by opening up that area to the oil industry. Zogby, on the other hand, framed the issue in a less biased way, asking

only one question related to the oil industry before the drilling question. But that one question helped present the issue as an environmental matter, and in that context a solid majority of the respondents opposed oil drilling.

A key to understanding how easy it was to manipulate respondents into giving the desired answers is recognizing that most people had little knowledge about ANWR going into the survey. Eighty-seven percent of Luntz's respondents, for example, could not say where the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is located—the same percentage could not accurately identify even one word of the acronym ANWR. In addition, only 8 percent said they knew either a lot or a good deal about the area. Despite this lack of knowledge, only 7 percent of Zogby's sample and 15 percent of Luntz's sample declined to offer an opinion. Clearly, information presented over the course of the interview helped many respondents form an instantaneous opinion.

Although the contradictory results make it difficult to specify what the "true" state of public opinion was, there are some useful indicators. Even a biased poll in favor of oil drilling found 34 percent opposed, and a biased poll opposed to oil drilling found 37 percent in favor—suggesting a mostly divided public, with a substantial proportion not having a deeply held opinion. But there were no intensity questions, so we don't know how engaged the public was—how many people had a deeply held view compared with how many expressed top-of-mind opinions.

A Gallup poll in March, 2005, just a couple of months after the Zogby and Luntz polls, tried to get at that intensity dimension when it first asked a neutral question: "Do you think the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska should or should not be opened up for oil exploration?" People were opposed 53 percent to 42 percent, with just 5 percent unsure. The follow-up question asked respondents if they would be upset if what occurred was the opposite of what they had just said they preferred. The result was that 19 percent of respondents wanted oil drilling and would be upset if it didn't happen, 45 percent were opposed and would be upset if it did happen, and 36 percent essentially didn't care. Among those who cared, opposition to the proposal was greater than 2 to 1, but there's a catch. The question was asked after numerous questions on global warming and on the ability of various government agencies to protect the nation's environment. In that context, the intense opposition measured by Gallup among its respondents might well be greater than among the public as a whole.

Unlike the other two polls, the Gallup poll on oil drilling in ANWR was not sponsored by a group with a vested interest in the results. Having

worked on that specific Gallup poll myself, I can personally attest to the fact that we did not intend to bias the results. The poll itself was part of Gallup's monthly Social Series surveys, which measure public opinion about various matters regularly. In January of each year, for example, Gallup devotes a poll to measuring the mood of the country, in February to public opinion on world affairs, in March to the environment, in April to the economy, and so on. Because there are so many questions related to the environment in the March poll, it would be impossible not to ask some questions after respondents had already heard several about the environment. Inevitably, the early questions will influence how some respondents answer the later ones. Generally, the more questions on the environment, the more likely respondents are to give environmentally positive responses as the interview continues.

The Luntz and Zogby examples illustrate how pollsters are often treated as guns-for-hire. In each case, the policy question itself was neutral, but the questionnaire context of each poll was manipulated to produce the desired results. Find the right pollster, get the right answer. This is not to say that on every topic, polls can produce whatever a sponsoring organization might want. But on topics about which most people know very little, enormous swings in results can easily be obtained by careful questionnaire designs.

The Gallup example illustrates what's wrong with most media polls that purport to measure an objective public opinion. Though it did measure the intensity of the expressed opinions, it failed in several other areas. There was no attempt to measure how much people knew about the issue, and the question was posed in a forced-choice format. Whether avoidable or not, the ANWR question was asked after several other questions about the environment, which clearly biased the answers of respondents who had been unengaged on the issue before the survey. And no attempt was made to discover why people supported or opposed the oil drilling. George Gallup wanted his polls to provide a guide for political leaders, but the results of the Gallup poll in this case were hardly useful for that purpose....

On January 8, 2008, the date of the New Hampshire primary, media pollsters suffered their biggest failure in election prediction since the 1948 presidential contest, when the three major scientific polls of the day all confidently predicted Republican Thomas Dewey to beat incumbent Democratic president Harry S. Truman. At the time, expectation of a Republican victory was so pervasive, news stories analyzing what a Dewey administration would look like were being written days before the actual election.

A similar national consensus emerged in the days just before the New Hampshire primary, when pundits of all stripes across the country were predicting the demise of Hillary Clinton's candidacy in light of eleven different polls forecasting her almost certain defeat on primary day. On average, these polls showed Barack Obama winning with 38 percent to Clinton's 30 percent. Obama's lead varied from 3 percentage points, reported by Franklin Pierce College, to 13 points, reported by both Gallup and Zogby. The stunning final vote count: Clinton won with 39 percent to Obama's 37 percent.

The magnitude of the pollsters' failure was highlighted by ABC's Gary Langer, who referred to it as "New Hampshire's Polling Fiasco," saying that it was "essential" to have a "serious critical look" at those results. "It is simply unprecedented for so many polls to have been so wrong," he wrote. "We need to know why." Langer's ABC News poll and its partner the *Washington Post* poll conducted a single survey in New Hampshire in early December but wisely avoided polling toward primary day, which meant that their poll results were too far removed to be compared with the vote count. Later Langer joked online, "What I like best about the final New Hampshire pre-election polls is that I didn't do any of them."

Langer's call for a serious critical look at other news media's polls was shared by key members of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Five days after the election, the association's president, Nancy Mathiowetz, announced the formation of an ad hoc committee "to evaluate pre-election primary methodology and the sponsorship of a public forum on the issue." After reassuring the public that polls have long been "remarkably accurate," Mathiowetz wrote that, "Sixty years ago the public opinion profession faced a crisis related to the poll predictions of the Truman-Dewey race. The way survey researchers reacted then—with a quick, public effort to identify the causes—played a key role in restoring public confidence and improving research methodology."

Many pollsters and pundits attributed the New Hampshire meltdown to the long-standing problem of "nonresponse"—the increasing difficulty in reaching respondents who are willing to be interviewed. These days, more and more people screen their calls with answering machines and caller ID. Even if pollsters can get through, Americans are increasingly unwilling to participate. The question posed by "New Hampshire's Polling Fiasco" was whether pollsters simply hadn't been able to reach enough Clinton supporters—and whether this portended a terrible polling performance for the presidential election campaign. . . .

In my estimation, the main reason the polls were wrong is that they stopped too early. A last-minute television news blitz on Sunday and

Monday, too late to be picked up by the polls, showed an emotional Clinton coming close to tears and looking both vulnerable and strong as she explained why she was campaigning so hard for president. Another video clip shown repeatedly in the last forty-eight hours before the election was former president Bill Clinton's passionate speech that Obama's claim to wiser judgment on the Iraq war was a "fairy tale," an argument that could have relieved doubts among antiwar voters concerned about Hillary Clinton's vote in favor of war. The frequent broadcasts of these two videos during the final hours leading up to the primary almost certainly influenced New Hampshire voters. And polling shows just who among those voters were most heavily influenced. Two days before the primary, the last Granite State poll showed only 34 percent of Democratic women intending to vote for Clinton. Postprimary exit polls, however, revealed that 46 percent of women wound up voting for her.

Though nonresponse was almost certainly not a major factor in the New Hampshire Democratic primary miscalls, it represents an ever-present threat to the validity of all polls. And there's not much pollsters can do about it. . . .

Related to the nonresponse issue is the steep increase in the number of Americans, especially young people, who rely on cell phones, which have typically been excluded from the samples used in most media polls. The cell phone issue burst into politics as a major issue for pollsters during the 2004 presidential election, when advocates for John Kerry claimed his support was underestimated by polls that had not been able to reach youthful voters. After the election, however, Pew's Scott Keeter analyzed the exit polls and concluded that while 7 percent of all voters were reachable by cell phone only, including a much higher percentage among young voters, that did not mean that the regular telephone preselection polls underestimated Kerry's vote. Polls that weighted their results to account for the underrepresentation of young voters generally were able to compensate for the lack of young voters with cell phones. Apparently, there were few differences in attitudes between young voters who could be reached only by cell phones and those who could be reached by landline. At least for the time being, telephone polls could continue without fear of a youth bias. . . .

In a special issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* published at the end of 2007, various researchers arrived at very different conclusions about the need for pollsters to include cell phones in their samples. Pew researchers reported on four separate surveys conducted in 2006 to compare the views of cell-phone-only respondents with those of landline-phone respondents, and found that excluding cell phones did not bias poll results

for the population as a whole. However, the authors cautioned that some results as they applied exclusively to young adults were biased because of the cell-phone exclusion. Young people with landlines are more likely to attend church and less likely to drink alcohol or approve of smoking marijuana, for example, than are young people with cell phones only. Still, the authors of the study concluded that overall, the utility of including cell-phone samples with the regular landline samples "appears marginal, at least at present."

Two other teams of researchers reached quite a different conclusion, and both argued that overall results applying to the general population would be biased if cell phones are excluded....

On January 14, 2008, Frank Newport of the Gallup Poll announced that as of the beginning of the year, Gallup had added "cell phone interviewing as part of the sample for general population studies." He admitted that it was a "complex and costly modification in methodology," and that Gallup was making the change despite the fact that "study after study has shown that in general, the effect of excluding from the interview process those who only have cell phones has not seemed to affect the overall marginal results of political studies." So, why did Gallup make such a bold change? Newport didn't say. Mark Blumenthal, founder of pollster.com, however, suggested that the real significance of the change was "symbolic." And because Gallup is the "granddaddy" of the polling industry, Blumenthal expected the change to have a "big ripple effect on the polling industry"....

The power of polls today far exceeds the visions of the early pollsters, who simply hoped that their scientific measurements of the public will would enhance the democratic process. But as I've made clear, that power is not always positive. The problem is that media polls today are designed to conceal the truth about the American public, a truth that everybody knows but that journalists and pollsters are reluctant to acknowledge.

Virtually everyone who studies or measures public opinion today recognizes that there is a distinction between what Daniel Katz called "a superficially held view which may be discarded the next moment" and "a cherished conviction which will change only under unusual pressure." The current academic debate focuses mostly on how to differentiate between the two extremes. Some researchers suggest there is a spectrum, from non-attitudes to quasi-attitudes to real attitudes. Quasi-attitudes are in the middle of the spectrum, because they signify lightly held views that tend to correlate with other opinions and demographic characteristics but also tend to be quite "labile." The issue is where along this spectrum it makes sense to draw the line between opinion and non-opinion....

To tell the truth about Americans' opinions on policy matters, pollsters should routinely measure the extent of public ignorance. It will never be zero, and in most cases it will represent a substantial proportion of the citizenry. Measuring it costs nothing; all it requires is offering an opinion that allows respondents to admit that they don't have an opinion. Because it's an important element in understanding the public, suppressing it for commercial or other purposes is simply unacceptable.

In addition, pollsters should include at least one additional question to measure the intensity of respondents' opinions. I would prefer... asking respondents if they would be "upset" if their opinion were not followed. There are other approaches, such as asking whether the issue is important to the respondents, or whether it would affect their vote for a political candidate. Whatever the approach, it's important to distinguish between the lightly held, top-of-mind response, which can change in an instant, and the more deeply held opinions that respondents want to see prevail....

Any description of the general public's orientation toward specific policy proposals needs to mention explicitly how large is the size of the disengaged public—the proportion of people who admit up front that they have no opinion, plus those who initially express a view but immediately say that they don't care if it is ignored by elected leaders. Anytime a poll reports less than 20 percent of the public disengaged, it's almost certain the results have been manipulated and should be viewed with deep suspicion....

Pollsters have known for a long time that election and public policy polls alike produce, at best, rough estimates of what the public is thinking. From the beginning of modern polling, experiments have shown that even small differences in question wording, or the order in which questions are read, can have a profound effect on results. The gender and race of interviewers, as well as whether surveys are conducted by telephone or online, through the mail, or in person can also affect responses. George Gallup was the first to conduct experiments that revealed the fuzziness of opinion, but he maintained a belief that the right questions, objectively worded, could accurately measure the will of the people. His vision was that polls would be able to continuously monitor "the pulse of democracy." It turns out that on most issues the public's pulse is either a bit weak or harder to discern than Gallup had hoped....

The real problem with telling the truth about the public and the electorate is not that the elected leaders or the public can't handle it, but that the news media might find it dull. Journalists like sharply divided groups and extreme reactions because that makes their stories more exciting.

They like the fake stories about voter preferences years ahead of the election, and the exciting horse race of a fully decided electorate that nevertheless keeps changing its mind. They have become addicted to the fiction of a completely rational, all-knowing, and fully engaged public. Should they be forced to report on the real public, a more prosaic public of which large segments are minimally informed or disengaged or have opinions that are ambiguous or tentative, journalists might lose their obsessive fascination with polls. That could happen to some extent, though I doubt even polls that told the unvarnished truth about the public would lose their journalistic appeal completely. But even if pollsters believed that a reformed polling system would cause the news media to rely less often on poll reports, that's no argument for pollsters to continue pumping up false numbers to satisfy the press's unrealistic expectations.

I'm hopeful, if not wildly optimistic, that we are witnessing a historical phase that will soon pass, and that a more responsible approach to measuring public opinion lies in the not-too-distant future. Widespread dissatisfaction with polls can only increase as their dismal performances continue. Eventually, the many conflicting and nonsensical results should shame pollsters and the news media into reform. Only if that happens will polls achieve their ideal role in the democratic process—telling the truth about the public, warts and all.