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THE TECHNIQUE OF PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

7 June 1948

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LT. COLONEL BABCOCK: Gentlemen, early in the Public Opinion Course various individuals in the student body have asked questions regarding the technique of public opinion survey. They have asked how to figure out a true cross sectional slice, how large the sample has to be, and all the various other related questions. Each time I have told them, "Just wait a while and we will have an expert down here who can tell you all about it."

The speaker this morning is visiting the Industrial college of the Armed Forces for the second time. He is an old friend of the College. He has been helping a great deal between visits in our efforts along public opinion lines. Mr. William A. Lydgate is Editor of the American Institute of Public Opinion, more commonly known to you as the Gallup Poll. He will speak this morning regarding the technique of public opinion surveys. I take great pleasure in presenting again to this College Mr. William A. Lydgate.

MR. LYDGATE: Colonel Babcock and gentlemen: When I first agreed to come down to give this talk, Colonel Babcock and Captain Worthington suggested that I might take as my topic "The Principles, Policies, and Procedures Involved in the Conduct of Public Opinion Polls." When I heard that, I felt a good deal as if I were in the Navy and my superior officer had just ordered me to go out and digest a battleship. Whether I can cover in fifty minutes the principles, policies, and procedures of public opinion polls is doubtful, but I will try.

They say the way to make a speech is to try to think up a good opening sentence if you can, then try to think up a good closing sentence, and then bring the two as close together as possible. I am going to have a good deal of difficulty in doing that today with so vast a subject.

Almost every one in the United States is an expert on public opinion. The sociologists are all experts in public opinion and its measurement. The psychologists are experts. The newspaper men are experts. The special political writers also. It is hard to find a man in the United States who is not, or at least does not consider himself, an expert in public opinion measurement. Hence there are all kinds of theories about it, all kinds of criticisms. Each man has his special vocabulary, his special sets of terms. When experts in public opinion get together, they spend at least the first ten minutes smelling out each other's vocabulary!

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There are two basic systems of cross sectioning--the quota method and the area method. The quota method is simply assigning your ballots by quotas of the various groups in the population. The difficulty about that system is that the statistics showing the size of each group are not always up to date and you have some possibility of error in your quota assignment. The area system is one in which, instead of trying to pick typical people, you pick typical areas. The areas may be the size of a city block or even part of a city block, or they may be a township or a precinct. The areas are selected at random.

The difference in results between the quota method and the area method is not very large. There are some people who say that area sampling is the better method, and there are some who say quota sampling is the better method. It is a technical argument involving a difference of perhaps two or three percentage points at the most between the two systems on the average.

Your next problem is how to reach the people who are going to be polled. The old-fashioned method was to reach them by mail, that is, to send the ballots through the mail. That was the method of the old Literary Digest polls. The difficulty with mail ballots is that you get a disproportionate response from the people who receive the ballots. Among your articulate and highly educated classes you get back a large volume of returns. They will take the trouble to fill out the ballot and mail it to you. In the low-income and low-education levels you will get a very small response.

One experiment we ran in the middle thirties showed that among persons listed in "Who's Who" you could expect a 40 percent return--that is, for every hundred ballots mailed to people in "Who's Who" you expect forty of the ballots to be filled out and returned. By contrast, among people who were on unemployment relief--this was in 1937--we found that only five percent would take the trouble to fill out and return their ballots. The people in the low-income levels seem to be not accustomed to handling mail and not accustomed to filling out these mail questionnaires and sending them back.

So with mail questionnaires you start with a problem of bias owing to the disproportionate response. There are ways of correcting that, of course. You can key your ballots so that you know which group has responded and get the proportion on that. Then you can correct the disproportion by sending more ballots to places where you are deficient. Mail ballots can be useful for the measurement of trends.

But in the end mail ballots are more trouble than the direct personal interview method. Most of the public opinion poll takers today, both in public opinion and in commercial research, use the personal interview method. They have interviewers located around the country

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This was in about August of last year. If I recall, the Secretary enunciated the principle of the Marshall Plan in a speech at Harvard in June. By August it was being talked about as a possible program. Our first survey was conducted in August and continued for many months. The first question was, "Have you heard or read about the Marshall Plan?" We found that in August of 1947 about 50 percent had heard or read of it. There was no point in asking the opinion of the other 50 percent without explaining to them what the Marshall Plan was, since they had never heard of it.

The 50 percent that had heard of the plan were then asked in the second question, "What is your opinion about the plan? What do you think of it?" They would say, "Well, it sounds good" or "It sounds bad" or "I think it is good if" giving the qualifications and the ramifications of their opinion. And then the third question, put to the 50 percent who had heard of the plan, was, "Should Congress appropriate X dollars"-- whatever the sum was at that time--"to adopt or carry out this plan?" And after expressing an opinion on that, then the fourth question was, "Why do you feel that way? Why do you think Congress should or should not adopt the plan?" Then the fifth question was, "How strongly do you feel?" in order to get some measurement of intensity.

Now, what to do with the other 50 percent--the 50 percent who said they had not heard or read about the Marshall Plan? After some experimenting we found that it was possible to give these people a brief description of the Marshall Plan and its principles and to poll their reactions. This measured, at least roughly, how the people unfamiliar with the Plan might react when they heard about it later on. And, of course, the proportion who had heard about the Marshall Plan did increase every month, growing to more than 80 percent by the time the measure was adopted by Congress.

There are many other aspects of question wording which I do not have time to go into now and which perhaps I can cover in the question period or later discussion. There is a great deal of literature on question wording. There are many experiments which have been tried. I recommend that those of you who are particularly interested in the question wording aspect get a bibliography of the literature and try out some of the experiments, many of which are very interesting.

Now, your fifth and final problem of the poll taker is avoiding general biases in approaching the subject polled. You have to be careful to cover your issue in a way that does not indicate bias on the part of the polling agency. You must try obviously not to have all your questions deal only with one aspect of the situation, but try to cover all sides. Those things are fairly obvious, and I imagine that most of you following the rules of common sense will not run into much of a problem there.

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of the United States Government. The value of polls as fact-finders and guides to handling the public in wartime might be seriously jeopardized through government control.

It seems a much more effective way to leave the poll takers alone in wartime and to work out some kind of arrangement whereby they can contribute to the war effort and contribute to the knowledge that is necessary in conducting a major war. Whether it should be done on the basis of contracts between the Government and private poll takers, how the details should be worked out, I don't know. But undoubtedly satisfactory solutions could be worked out.

Now, the uses of polls are many, it seems to me, in wartime. There is a great deal that can be done with the public opinion survey the moment mobilization day comes. I would list, first studies of morale. Do people believe in the war? Do the people of the Nation understand what the war is all about? Have they a will to work for victory? Have they a will to sacrifice for the war effort, and to what degree? Such problems, it seems to me, are vital to a successful conduct of a war under modern conditions. By the use of the public opinion survey techniques it is possible to keep a running chart of morale. You could have six or seven key items of morale tested for trend every few months so that you know clearly how the home front is taking the war.

By the public opinion survey technique you can study the effects of war events, of battles, on the collective mind of the civilian population. During the late war we had many surveys in which we studied the impact of the battles on people's attitudes here. You remember the races back and forth in Africa between Rommel on the German side and the British generals. We tested the effect of those on morale here in the United States and our attitudes toward the British.

Also it is possible to collect rumors during wartime by means of a public opinion poll technique. Having interviewers all over the United States, it is very simple to send them out to poll a cross section of the people and ask, "Are there any rumors that you have heard in this area about the war?" We did that on several occasions during World War II and published a collection of rumors connected with the war. Such information, I should say, would be useful for the proper guidance of the civilian front by the Army or by the Navy during wartime.

By the use of public opinion surveys you can find and study the reasons for absenteeism in war plants or war factories. If you have a high absenteeism rate among your war workers, you need to find out why. You need to find out in detail and scientifically. We found from experience in the late war that theories given by the employers as to why there was absenteeism did not always stand up in the light of

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be done." Sometimes experts can see and appreciate the tide of public opinion and sometimes they can go very wrong. I would like to give you a few examples from commercial life which indicate that sometimes experts need a survey to put them on the right track.

One is the case of the catalogue cover of a large mail order house. Three years ago the executives of the company had the problem of deciding what type of illustration to put on the first postwar catalogue. They had narrowed the choices down to 12 pictures. Before deciding they wanted these twelve samples of possible covers tried out on catalogue customers. So they called in a public opinion research organization.

Before the survey was conducted, each of the twelve executives made a guess as to which one of the 12 pictures the people would probably pick in the survey. Then the twelve samples were taken out and tried on a cross section of catalogue customers. It was found that illustration which the company executives had listed as the least likely to be picked by the people turned out to be the number one choice. So you can't always rely on expert guessing to find out what it is that the masses really want.

Another use for the opinion survey in wartime is questioning people on the peace terms. When war is over, we have to decide what the future is going to be, what kind of world the people want, how they are going to translate their victory into a better society. Statesmen may want to find out the ideas of the people for peace.

In all survey work during wartime, I would think it important to coordinate the work of polling organizations in different countries. Presumably in another war we would have some allies. At least, I hope we would. In those allied countries--let us assume, for instance France or Italy or England or the Scandinavian countries--there are existing polling organizations, so that it would be possible to study opinion among our allies as well as in this country on the same questions.

I think I am not violating any confidences if I tell you that the State Department recently approached us to inquire whether we could conduct surveys in four foreign countries where we have affiliated organizations, to get the reaction in those countries to the Voice of America programs on the radio. I think we are going to do the job through our affiliates. The State Department very wisely is seeking to find out how effective the Voice of America programs are in these foreign countries in accomplishing a given job. Useful information for programming may be revealed.

Public opinion research is highly flexible. You can literally find out anything you want to know if you are skilful enough. The classic example is the Kinsey Report. Dr. Kinsey proved that with good

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sea, dictators. Obviously a public opinion polling organization cannot determine when a madman like Hitler is going to pull a gun.

QUESTION: What you have said confirms my belief that public opinion polls, if used against us in a democracy, could be a terrific weapon for an enemy. I would like to ask you whether you feel that I am right; and, if so, do you think those who take polls should be licensed during war, so that we could deny the use of such a weapon, if it is one?

MR. LYDGATE: I think that your point involves a greater issue. I would say that a great many of the instruments of a democracy can be turned against the democracy by an enemy. The enemies of this Nation can easily take advantage of our freedom of speech and try to turn it against us.

But I would say that the continued presence of such aspects of a democracy as freedom of speech are the greatest strength that we have. If you try to suppress the strong points of a democracy on the ground that they can be used against us, I think that you get into more hot water than you do by the other policy. So if you are willing to go so far as to say that all the elements of a democracy should be suppressed, then I suppose you have to suppress polls too, along with the press, radio, books, magazines, the movies--all the things that make up a democracy.

QUESTION: Would you discuss the extent to which the newspapers use the information which you get? I am thinking particularly of the opportunity to select the subject matter in your Sunday supplements. In that section of the Sunday paper they could expand upon such issues as the Marshall Plan and others.

MR. LYDGATE: Our results are sent for publication to the newspapers. Our obligation goes no further than that. The papers take this material and publish it. I think in some cases at least the papers do follow a policy of trying to give further information and further enlightenment to their readers when polls show that there are blind spots or ignorance about such issues.

QUESTION: Do your polls indicate which is the best system of influencing public opinion when a situation exists, whether newspapers, magazines, or radio programs have the most effect?

MR. LYDGATE: That is a very searching question. The answer is obscure. I don't think there is any systematic body of information that would give you the answer. There ought to be, and we hope that as time goes on and as we learn more, we will be able to answer that.

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Take your case of the draft. People opposed to it are a highly organized, highly articulate, minority who make a much louder noise than the pro-draft people. I would expect that always to be the case, because those who are willing to sacrifice, willing that their sons be drafted, are not going to come down to Washington and say "Please, Mister, draft my son." They are not going to go around beating their breasts and saying "I want to sacrifice." But that doesn't mean that they are not willing to sacrifice if they see the need or if the situation is explained to them. The minority, the people who don't want their sons drafted, are the ones who come to Washington and say, "Don't you draft my boy." So it is unrealistic to suppose that the numerical majority in favor of the draft will ever raise much of a rumpus about it. But the legislators should not conclude from that that the people are unwilling to make the sacrifice.

One of the basic problems in a democracy is government by pressure groups. "The wheel that creaks the loudest gets the most grease." Congress postponed action on the draft year after year--partly I think in fear of the consequences from a vociferous minority.

We have here a problem where a numerical majority is in favor of something, but the articulate minority seems to have greater sway. You find that this goes all through American history. One of the problems of a democracy is translating the will of the majority into action.

People used to talk about the "Tyranny of the majority." That was one of Alexander Hamilton's favorite phrases. They were terribly afraid when they drew up the Constitution that the majority would tyrannize the minority, would jeopardize the rights of the small groups. We think that there is greater danger today in the tyranny of the minority; that the minority has often blocked progress, has often held up programs which the majority wanted.

QUESTION: Do you have any information as to whether the leaders of the Russian Government have ever polled their people to find out what they think?

MR. LYDGATE: Not at first hand. But in Wendell Willkie's book "One World," Willkie says that Stalin conducts "his own Gallup Poll" in Russia. He didn't give the details on it, and I am not familiar enough with Russian affairs to know; but I believe there is a cell representative, a block representative, in each area, who is supposed to observe the reactions of the people in his particular block and report them to the Kremlin. How fair the system is, how well it works, or what they find out I don't know. I would certainly like to know.

I think in any dictatorship there is always a great tendency on the part of the dictator to be sensitive to public opinion. A dictator

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The area sampling system is much more expensive than the quota sampling system because of the enormous cost of drawing up your areas. The Census Bureau and the Department of Census of the Statistical Laboratory at Ames, Iowa, both have services for drawing up area samples for people who want them, but the cost is exceedingly high.

LT. COLONEL BABCOCK: On behalf of the Commandant and the College, I wish to express our appreciation of your return visit and to thank you for having contributed so much to our study.

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