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Fiasco in 1936 Survey Brought 'Science' To Election Polling

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President Alf Landon?

In the fall of 1936, the most influential poll in America, run by Literary Digest magazine, predicted that Mr. Landon, governor of Kansas, would trounce the Democratic incumbent, Franklin Roosevelt, with 57% of the popular vote. Literary Digest's poll was massive -- it sent out 10 million ballots that year -- and it had correctly forecast five previous presidential elections. There was widespread concern that the poll might create a bandwagon effect, giving Mr. Landon an even bigger victory.

The poll could hardly have been more wrong. Mr. Roosevelt won the election with more than 60% of the popular vote; Mr. Landon carried only two states, Maine and Vermont. The failure of the Literary Digest and other, smaller polls, "will undoubtedly revive agitation for their abolition or control," wrote the New York Times. Kenneth McKellar, a Democratic senator from Tennessee, called the Literary Digest poll "wicked," and promised to sponsor legislation to put polling under federal supervision.

Although by that time polling was not a young business, it was still operating in the statistical Dark Ages. First used around 1824, straw polls (named for the way farmers threw a fistful of straw in the air to see which way the wind was blowing) were often taken by traveling journalists or private citizens. They might ask everyone on a steamship or train how they intended to vote. One man who traveled around the Northeast in 1856 did 23 polls, interviewing 2,886 people, wrote Susan Herbst in her 1993 book, "Numbered Voices." All of his polls were published in the New York Times.

One reader in 1896 wrote to the Times about a recent poll he had witnessed on a train. "A straw poll of 23 riders showed 18 for McKinley, five for Bryan. ... When the train halted at Ballston, among those who got off were the five Bryan sympathizers, and then it was

seen that they were handcuffed together, and were a gang of prisoners on their way to the county jail."

Literary Digest, a general-interest weekly founded in 1890, began doing straw polls in 1916. It mailed ballots to its subscribers, gradually building up a list with publicly available names of people who owned telephones and cars. At its peak, the magazine sent ballots to 20 million people, and employed 400 clerks to tally the returns.

But magazine subscribers and owners of cars and telephones during the Great Depression tended to be more affluent than the average voter -- and more Republican. Indeed, in its 1936 pre-election report, the magazine reported that a skeptic had called its office to ask, "Has the Republican National Committee purchased the Literary Digest?" Commented the magazine, "Absurd and amusing."

In its postelection report, however, the editors acknowledged that the poll undersampled some groups of voters. And whose fault was that? "We wonder why we get better cooperation in what we have always regarded as a public service from Republicans than we do from Democrats. Do Republicans live nearer mailboxes? Do Democrats generally disapprove of straw polls?"

Even among the subset of people who received ballots, there was an element of self-selection. People with ample leisure were more likely to take the trouble to help Literary Digest. But plenty of the "lower strata," as the magazine called them, voted that year.

There was at least one man who relished the Literary Digest fiasco: George Gallup. Mr. Gallup, a market researcher and syndicated columnist, had begun experimenting with so-called scientific methods of polling, and in July 1936, he predicted Literary Digest would call the election erroneously. He himself projected a Democratic victory, although his margin turned out to be way off.

Mr. Gallup, of course, was one of the leaders of the pack that predicted Thomas Dewey would beat Harry Truman in 1948. Pollsters' methods and tools -- and confidence -- had improved so much in the dozen years since 1936 that they decided they didn't need to collect more data after October. In a postelection poll by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan, 14% of Truman voters said they made up their minds in the two weeks before the election, and 3% said they decided on Election Day.

"Everyone believes in public-opinion polls," joked the radio comic Goodman Ace. "Everybody from the man on the street all the way up to President Thomas E. Dewey."

By 1948, Literary Digest was long gone. It had already been facing financial problems when its poll flopped; it suspended publication in 1938 and later merged with Time

magazine.

Its editor in 1936, Wilfred J. Funk, derided Mr. Gallup's methodology, saying mockingly that the Digest's poll had never been able to discover "how many rich men, poor men, G-men, racketeers and candlestick makers" voted in any given election. Twelve years later, a reporter asked Mr. Funk to comment on the Truman-Dewey polls.

"I do not want to seem to be malicious," Mr. Funk said, "but I can't help but get a good chuckle out of this. ... I wonder if the word science will continue to be used with this type of public-opinion poll."

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