

For example, in an August 1 piece, Sevareid portrays polls as a curiosity rather than a tool for voters:

SEVAREID: There is a natural human fascination with all efforts to foretell the mysterious future. After all, fortune tellers have been in business for many centuries, even before the Delphic Oracle of the ancient Greeks.

But as things stand right now, in this apparently close and highly confusing political struggle, everyone would be just about as well off if we went back to crystal balls, palm reading and tea leaves. Or of course we could just go about our duty and our business as citizens and fashion the future from the facts, from our ideals and emotions and convictions, instead of trying to guess it.¹⁰

On August 27, Sevareid quoted Winston Churchill on the subject: “Nothing is more dangerous in wartime than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup Poll, always feeling one’s pulse and taking one’s temperature.”¹¹

In a later commentary, on October 15, Sevareid elaborates further, placing polls at the center of the campaigning universe:

SEVAREID: In the world of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. An American presidential campaign is a blind affair, full of far more uncertainties than certainties, more emotions than facts. . . . But there is a one-eyed man present and his powers are close to kingly, even though he doesn’t really want them and doesn’t admit he has them. This man is the professional opinion poller. His function has not exactly become a fourth branch of government, but during a campaign it becomes an enormous influence.¹²

Sevareid next quickly summarizes what pollsters do, discusses valid and invalid polling methods and acknowledges that pollsters are not responsible for what candidates or news media do with their numbers. Nevertheless, he says he is concerned with their effects on the process:

SEVAREID: But it can no longer be pretended that the polls merely portray and do not affect. Those neat, hard little figures every few days are the closest thing to certainties the candidates have, and every candidate’s entourage is obsessed by them. They directly influence the candidate as to what areas he will skip, what areas he will concentrate upon, the issues he will emphasize, the issues he will fuzz over or say nothing about. To the candidate running ahead in the polls, the money easily comes in. For the underdog in the polls, many sources of funds dry up. And sometimes campaign workers are recruited with ease or with difficulty, depending on the polls.

Few authorities feel certain as to what ought to be done about political opinion polls, if anything. But if the campaigns affect the Election Day results, then the polls affect those results, because they surely affect the campaigns.¹³