

This is a departure from the issue-based reporting that dominated the coverage to this point, and while issues would still be the centerpiece of most of CBS's reporting in 1972, the sheer size of the Nixon lead began to influence the tone of coverage in certain stories.

A later example involved Cronkite reporting the poll numbers and reporter Bob Schieffer discussing their impact on the McGovern campaign:

CRONKITE: While the national public opinion polls have reported a dismal standing for Senator McGovern, his staff has professed optimism. In the key states, the big ones with lots of electoral votes, they tell confidantes McGovern is doing well. And now comes a poll which must shake that confidence. The Yankelovich Survey, confined to 16 key states, which together have more than enough electoral votes to win, shows President Nixon with a whopping 39 percentage point lead—62 to 23 over McGovern. Furthermore, when broken down by states, the survey, taken for Time Magazine and The New York Times, shows President Nixon not only leading, but also increasing his margin over a similar Yankelovich telephone poll conducted a month ago . . . Bob Schieffer, who is traveling with the McGovern campaign, reports the reaction.

SCHIEFFER: Three inches of snow fell in Billings overnight, but George McGovern said he'd take a Montana snowstorm anytime over a Nixon snow job. Outwardly, at least, McGovern kept his usual cool about the polls. Aides tried yesterday to blunt the impact of the newest one, releasing their own poll showing that McGovern was gaining rather than losing, and calling the new poll one that has been spectacularly wrong before. Today, though, their reaction was as frosty as this Montana weather. They turned down all requests for interviews, said the subject of polls in general had been adequately discussed, and said Senator McGovern had no comment. Still, the news of the new survey must be discouraging to McGovern, since it shows him sagging in the very states, the big states, he had hoped to win.

At any rate, the McGovern campaign takes a new turn at midweek. After a brief swing down the West Coast, McGovern returns to Washington. He feels the whirlwind schedule has left his message fragmented, so in Washington he'll work on developing some new messages which can be broadcast later over television, messages that aides hope will better explain the McGovern position, and add some new spark to the McGovern campaign.¹⁷

This entire story casts McGovern's campaign as reeling from its poor poll standing. While it never specifically states that McGovern is changing his strategy because of the poll numbers, the implication is that the campaign is "taking a new turn" because of the numbers. Reporters in later campaigns had few qualms about telling viewers that a candidate's behavior on the trail was completely attributable to poll numbers, but Schieffer's story doesn't go quite that far. In fact, it's quite possible that the only reason this story angle was taken was that the McGovern campaign gave reporters nothing else to work with (a mistake future campaign organizations would not repeat).