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PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

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Perceptions of Public Opinion Polls

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
Nadine S. Koch, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1985

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1985
DEDICATION

In memory of my Nana, Mary Geller
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, and foremost I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for their unflagging support. A very special thanks to my committee chair, Professor Kristi Andersen. Even though we were many miles apart, Kristi continued to be a source of intellectual and emotional support. The grueling experience of completing my dissertation was made immeasurably better by her involvement. She has my deepest thanks! Professor Herbert Weisberg, who was gracious enough to join my committee during my last year of work, provided not only emotional and intellectual support, but also much needed financial support. His door was always open and his concern for his students is unsurpassed. Thanks also to Professor Thom McCain. He saved me from becoming a "terminal" ABD by pressing me to move on with my research. He was quite generous with his time, in terms of providing me with guidance, helping me to iron out some rather difficult substantive and methodological problems. Through Thom's networking, we were able to obtain project funding from ABC Broadcasting.
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Completing one's Ph.D. is bittersweet, for with this achievement comes the realization that one has to say goodbye to many wonderful friends and colleagues. They will all be sorely missed, but not forgotten.
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Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

In 1980 Albert Gollin, the current president of the American Association of Public Opinion Research, wrote that in contemporary America public opinion is synonymous with poll findings (Gollin, 1980). Probably few would disagree with his assertion. In recent years, research in the area of public opinion and discussions (both academic and non-academic) about public opinion have more often than not defined public opinion as the opinions expressed in public opinion polls.

However, twentieth century public opinion research had not always been poll-oriented. At least since the late 19th century, before the advent of modern survey research methods, scholars had been investigating the role of public opinion in contemporary American society. Lippmann's (1922) early philosophical tract Public Opinion questioned the existence of a monolithic Public Opinion and argued for the acknowledgement of psychological variations among the populus which, he believed, precluded the formation of a true Public Opinion on any public issue. Individuals'
attitudes, beliefs, or opinions are formed according to their personal experiences and their perceptions of the world around them, with each individual operating from a different experiential and perceptual base. Lippmann then proceeded to dismantle the sacred linkages of public opinion, representation, and public policy, linkages which presumably set democracies apart from other forms of government.

Forty years later, a political scientist, V.O. Key, Jr., (1964) paid homage to Lippmann's astute insights yet vehemently assailed Lippmann's conclusions regarding the role of public opinion in the democratic process. Key, excusing Lippmann's cynicism as an understandable by-product of the post World War I era, attempted to reaffirm the linkages Lippmann had questioned. It appeared that Key was quite successful (or perhaps Lippmann's analysis never fully gained acceptance) for, in the decades to follow, much of the public opinion research has concentrated on the degree to which public opinion is related to policy decisions, leaders' awareness of constituents' preferences, and other related issues.(1)

---------------------

(1) The works of Miller and Stokes, 1963; V.O. Key, Jr., 1964; Cnuddle and McCrone, 1966; Wilcox, 1966; Devine, 1970; Clausen, 1973; and Weissberg, 1976 best exemplify the linkage studies.
On more of a macro, societal level, scholars have attempted to delineate the stages and processes involved in the formation of public opinion. Davison (1957, 1972), Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1977), O'Gorman (1975), Fields and Schuman (1976), Taylor (1981) others have theorized about how the public formulates opinions on important issues of the day. Of particular interest to these researchers was the role played by the individual's perceptions of what the majority's opinion was on a chosen issue. It has been hypothesized that the individual's perception of the majority opinion (whether correctly perceived or misperceived) might influence the individual's publicly pronounced opinion and/or behavior.

As far as the current state of research, it appears that Gollin was correct in his assessment that, today, public opinion is synonymous with polls. This past decade has seen a substantial amount of research focusing on this relatively new phenomenon: public opinion polling. This emphasis, on the relationship between public opinion polls and the behavior of the electorate and/or the individual, is not surprising considering the technological and structural changes that have occurred during the last 20 years. A new style of campaign politics has emerged, in which the party organization no longer plays the key role. The media, political consultants, and the indispensable tools
of their trade — among them public opinion polls — have taken center stage. Political opinion polls have come to dominate the campaign. It is no wonder then, that political scientists and communication scholars have an avid interest in discovering the role played by polls in the electoral process.

Bandwagon research specifically attempts to measure the direct effects of publicized candidate preference polls and early election night results on the political behavior of the electorate. Researchers have addressed this relationship by examining the impact of poll results on the decision to vote, vote choice, and presidential popularity ratings (Klapper, 1964; Fuchs, 1966; Mendelsohn, 1966; Atkins, 1968; Beniger, 1976; Navazio, 1977; Tyson and Kaplowitz, 1977; Epstein and Strom, 1981; Wolfinger and Linquiti, 1981; Ceci and Kain, 1982; Jackson, 1983). This research has often reported contradictory findings. As an example, Navazio, and Ceci and Kain have found some shift in candidate evaluations and preference as a result of exposure to political polls in experimental settings. Yet, Tyson and Kaplowitz employing a similar methodology studied the effects of falsified poll data on college students' attitudes with regard to a number of social issues and found little evidence of attitudinal conformity to the poll information provided. Studies of exit poll projections
follow a similar pattern. Wolfinger and Linquiti found reduced voter turnout on the West Coast in the 1972 presidential election as a result of the networks' early projections, as did Jackson in his analysis of the 1980 presidential contest. Epstein and Strom reached an opposite conclusion in their study of the 1980 presidential election, finding no significant media or poll effects.(2)

Early on, the lack of significant findings indicating bandwagon or underdog effects on the electorate, or for that matter any attitudinal shifts related to exposure to poll results, led some researchers down what they hoped would be a more rewarding path. Believing that public opinion polls do have an impact on contemporary American politics, Mendelsohn and Crespi concluded that, "the true significance of polls lie in their direct influence not upon the electorate, but upon the behavior of politicians"(p.,25). Mendelsohn and Crespi wanted to direct attention away from the study of direct effects of the polls upon voting decisions. They advocated research which

(2) There are those who believe that election polls do influence elections, and the electorate, even without the support of conclusive empirical data. In Portugal the broadcasting or reporting of political polls is prohibited for almost one month prior to election day. In France, the restrictive period is of a shorter duration. Publication of poll results are allowed up until 14 days before election. The United States Congress must also believe that political polls, specifically exit polls from which early projections are made, are unduly influencing electoral behavior. In the summer and fall of 1984 they passed non-binding resolutions stating their grievances against such broadcasts.
would address more encompassing questions of the overall "relevances of public opinion polling and television to our national political life" (p. 25). Perhaps their shift, to the study of process-oriented effects, was a result of the inability of the bandwagon studies to conclusively confirm direct linkages between reported poll data and subsequent poll-induced attitudinal or behavioral changes.

Whatever the reasons, Mendelsohn and Crespi's contentions bring to the forefront an important question: Does the inconclusiveness and contradictory nature of the more recent effects studies necessitate a change in research direction? Is individual-oriented, micro level, effects research leading us down a dead-end path? I think not. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from the trials and tribulations of communication scholars who have desperately tried to detect direct media effects: this has proven to be an almost impossible research endeavor. However, just because one cannot measure direct effects does not mean that they don't exist. It might be the case that the state of our art is such that we are not able to measure what is essentially an extremely complex and subtle process.

Polls' influence on the individual and on the public is an area that needs address. Although the research of the past decades has failed to provide persuasive evidence pointing to poll effects, it is difficult to imagine the
public not being somehow affected by public opinion polls. This is true for a number of reasons. First, there has been an incredible proliferation of public opinion pollsters at both the national and local levels. In recent years, in-house polling departments have been established at most major print and broadcast organizations. Dye and Zeigler (1983) have estimated that if one also includes the public and private research foundations, the total number of polling organizations approaches two hundred. Ismach (1984) claims that there are double or triple this number of polling organizations. He found that, "As we move into the mid-1980's there is evidence that as many as 500 to 600 news organizations are regularly conducting polls and other quantitative studies. The American public is being inundated with public opinion polls, especially those of the political variety.

One could reasonably make the argument that this deluge of poll data must be having some effect on the electorate. Information about how others, the public, stand on issues of the day, is being disseminated via the media. From what is known about the activity of information acquisition, there is a great likelihood that such information is being attended to. According to Chaffee (1979), there are two important factors related to the activity of information acquisition. The individual will utilize sources which are
easily accessible, and the source of information must be perceived as being credible. With regard to the first, there is no doubt that the mass media, whether it be television, newspapers, or the radio is readily accessible to most all adults. As far as credibility is concerned, study after study has indicated that the mass media are perceived as being highly credible sources of information, especially television news programming. Public opinion polls are disseminated from sources that are not only easily accessible, but are perceived as being relatively credible.

Graber's (1984) recent work on the cognitive processing of political news also provides support for this speculative claim. She found that:

The widespread interest in knowing what the public approves or condemns in also reflected in avid attention to stories reporting public opinion poll results (p.,167).

Apparently, there is an awareness of polls, although no empirical data is available indicating the amount of attention paid to this type of information. However, Chaffee's conditions of information acquisition, coupled with Graber's findings of attentiveness to public opinion polls do suggest that poll information is being utilized.

Related to this discussion is Gollin's identification of a number of preconditions that must be met for polls to have an effect on the individual. One necessary precondition is that the individual have an awareness of the exis-
ence of public opinion polls. Other preconditions are that the individual must have confidence in polls and that they must perceive the poll as being credible. As to the question of the public's awareness of public opinion polls, as reported, Graber did find that her subjects paid "avid" attention to the polls. Regarding Gollin's other preconditions, the only research addressing the issues of poll confidence and poll credibility has been conducted by the pollsters themselves. Both the Gallup and Roper organizations recently conducted national surveys on the topic of public confidence in public opinion polls (Clymer, 1985). Gallup found that 68% of the public found election polls to be "right most of the time", and 73% agreed that polls were a "good thing for the country." The Roper study reported similar results. However, Mervin Field, head of the nationally recognized Field Institute, assailed the Gallup and Roper findings. He contends that, "those people who answer questions in a poll are inherently more sympathetic to polls than those who refuse to be interviewed" (Clymer, 1985). The question of poll confidence then still remains inadequately answered.

Having made the argument that publicized public opinion polls probably satisfy the preconditions set by Chaffee and Gollin, there are other reasons to believe that the public is being affected by polls. It is difficult to
imagine the public not being influenced by polls because the information provided in public opinion polls is probably quite informative and helpful to the average citizen. Countless studies, addressing many facets of political behavior, have found that individuals' political beliefs and behavior are influenced by the political beliefs and activities of members of their reference groups. Whereas in earlier times, individuals through their community obligations and responsibilities were afforded frequent opportunities for personal contact with others in their community, modern society all but precludes this. Contemporary life in industrialized societies is characteristically atomistic, individualistic, and isolated. Through the media's transmission of information about how others think, feel, and behave with regard to all sorts of issues, citizens are able to acquire information about others in their community. One way of connecting with others, some of whom are perceived to be like ourselves, might be through the information contained in publicized opinion polls. Something akin to this process was described by Davison, and by Riesman and Glazer:

Opinion research is one of the most important mechanisms through which people become acquainted with their extended social environment. Within our immediate circle we can make direct observations about our friends, neighbors, and co-workers. But we are coming to rely more and more on surveys to inform us about groups outside this circle (Davison(b), p.316).
"the upper and lower levels of our culture converse with each other across status lines by means of the polls and, of course, also by means of the mass media and many other forms of exchange" (Riesman and Glazer, p.,45).

As suggested, public opinion polls help to inform us about those groups with whom we have minimal contact, groups whose opinions are sometimes considered in the formulation of our own positions.

Perhaps public opinion polls might serve another important function for the individual. Lippmann, in his brilliant work Public Opinion, described a situation he believed to exist in most all industrialized and postindustrialized societies. Lippmann argued that the individual is not able to have direct experience with many of the events that occur in the world, whether it be his/her own community or half way across the world. Yet, we know about our environment, our world. We learn about our world indirectly, through others' accounts and the media. These reports provide the information by which we structure our beliefs. As Lippmann saw it:

For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it (p.,16).

He goes on to state that:

We shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him (p.,25).
It might be the case that public opinion polls simplify one's world. With regard to politics and the individual, polls might identify the "important" issues of the day (agenda-setting) and help to condense the abundance of political stimuli. As an example, candidate preference polls might play an essential role, in an electoral context, by their identification of winners and losers. For some, maybe the "pictures in their heads" are drawn entirely by political poll information, while for others such information might provide only the shading.

A melding of the sociological perspective, which points to the difficulties encountered by the individual in industrialized societies, with the psychological/cognitive processing approaches, suggests the need for, and possible utilization of, information which is provided by political polls.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

As will be discussed in this section, there are important questions that still need to be addressed concerning the relationship between the individual and public opinion polls. Rather than attempting to measure the direct impact of poll results on the public, less ambitious, yet potentially more fruitful research questions must be formulated.
Much of the aforementioned poll effects research has attempted to measure the effects of the opinions of others, as reported in polls, on the individual. As described, the results have been contradictory and inconclusive. Although the methodological techniques employed and measures adopted appear to be sound, it might be the case that the behavior and processes under study are just too complex and subtle to be detected using these methods. And, if Davison is correct in his description of information acquisition, in that, "people learn about the opinion of others without realizing that they are seeking them" (Davison(a), p. 111), then the assumption of direct causal relationships between opinion polls and individual attitudinal and/or behavioral changes will be all the more difficult to confirm. Perhaps other questions need to be addressed before research can satisfactorily confront questions of direct effects and causality. In order to better understand the relationship between public opinion, as expressed in public opinion polls, and the influence it exerts, it is necessary that we investigate people's perceptions of the polls.

For researchers concerned with individual behavior, it is imperative that we understand the perspective from which our subjects are operating. What are their perceptions of the relationships we are so eager to study? What is their understanding of the phenomena under question? Are the
relationships, as we define them, as salient to the public as they are to us, the researchers? Some basic, yet essential questions must be addressed. Since this area of inquiry is relatively new, and the few studies conducted have reported contradictory findings, it would behoove us to do some elementary groundwork. The ultimate goal is to be able to make some generalizable statements about how public opinion polls affect the public. It would seem appropriate then, to seek information about individuals' understanding, perceptions, and uses of poll data. Are people paying attention to polls? Under what conditions? Do they find poll information useful? In what ways? Are they discriminating consumers of polls? Do they distinguish between the scientific and non-scientific polls? What do they believe is the role of public opinion polls in their community and nation? Do they believe polls affect individual's opinions and subsequent behavior? These are just a few of the basic questions that need to be addressed.

This study attempts to answer the above questions and then go beyond them. There is a paucity of research in this area. In fact no study has dealt with the public's understanding, use, or perceptions of public opinion polls. Rather than making some sophisticated assumptions about how the public might be behaving with respect to the polls, I
thought it best to adopt an exploratory research approach. To do so, I conducted a series of focus group sessions in which participants were asked to discuss a variety of different public opinion polls.

Perhaps by first understanding how the public relates to polls researchers will be better able to investigate the impact of polls on individual behavior. As Babbie states,

> Exploratory studies are very valuable in social scientific research. They are essential whenever a researcher is breaking new ground, and they can almost always yield new insights into a topic of research...They can hint at the answers and can give insights into the research methods that could provide definitive answers (p.,75).

Babbie's statements are worth elaborating upon. First, as argued in this chapter, too often researchers rush into the field, elaborate questionnaires in hand, ready and eager to extract information from the unsuspecting public. Unfortunately, in some cases (usually those in which research is dealing with new phenomena) eagerness to collect quantitative data overshadows the immensely important questions concerning the validity of the measures and the appropriateness of the research methodology. It is interesting to note that few researchers are engaging in exploratory research today. One factor which may be related to the virtual absence of exploratory studies is that the findings are not representative, not generalizable to the population of interest. As Craig has suggested in his defense of non-survey research methods:
My findings obviously cannot be generalized to the American public as a whole but, even though a genuine concern for external validity helps to explain why most political scientists prefer to use sample surveys, there still are a number of ways in which the information gathered through depth interviews can enhance our understanding of mass political opinion (p.,3).

Craig's point should not be understated. Although it is certainly the case that qualitative data is limited in its applicability to the general population, there in no question that in many instances the findings offer incredibly powerful insights into the relationships under investigation.

I hope that the findings of this study will provide support for Babbie's other two contentions. One is that exploratory research provides the investigator with a wealth of information, often pointing to relationships that had never before been considered. What better way to gain an understanding of how individuals relate to events, processes, and various entities than to ask them to talk about it in their own, everyday language? It is an opportunity to bridge the gap between the researchers' perceptions of how the public behaves and/or thinks and the public's own perceptions. Secondly, as will be evidenced by the concluding chapter, exploratory research can provide new and intriguing insights, filling one's research agenda for many years to come.
The following chapter will present a detailed account of the methodology employed, describing the selection process; the response rate; the format of the interview; questions asked (verbally and written); and the limitations and advantages of this research design in light of the research questions at hand. Chapter 3 will present findings which address the questions of how much does the public understand and know about public opinion polling techniques and their ability to distinguish between the scientific and the non-scientific. Chapter 4 reports on participants' perceptions of various polls' credibility and the numerous ways in which individuals utilize poll information. It is in Chapter 4 that some cognitive processing theories are applied to the respondents' remarks, as well as the uses and gratifications framework devised by communication scholars. Chapter 5 will look specifically at three types of political polls: political polls in the generic sense; network exit polls and the resultant early projections; and Congressional mail questionnaires. The concluding chapter, Chapter 6, will offer a summary of the findings and suggest future research topics that are indicated by the findings of this study.
Chapter II
METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research design was adopted for this study. It was thought, as argued in the previous chapter, that such an approach would be most appropriate in light of the questions that needed to be addressed. This chapter will provide a description of how this exploratory research design was operationalized and of the advantages and limitations of this strategy.

As stated in the introductory chapter, the purpose of this research was to answer some questions that public opinion researchers have neglected to address. It hasn't been so much the case that these questions have been ignored outright; rather, it appears that scholars have made a certain number of assumptions about the public and public opinion polls. This might be more insidious, for assumptions, if allowed to go unchecked long enough, have the potential of gaining legitimacy. I have argued that it would behoove the student of public opinion to engage in some preliminary research in order to better understand some of the relationships of concern. Obtaining informa-
tion on perceptions held by individuals about public opinion polls, their understanding of polls and polling techniques, and their thoughts on the influence and use of polls for the individual and for society should be useful for future investigations. This topic has not been aggressively pursued by researchers, and the absence of such information constitutes a serious research oversight. For if we, as public opinion researchers, are intent on understanding the relationship between publicized public opinion polls and the public, what better way to learn then by talking with those whose behavior intrigues us?

Perhaps Craig (1985), cited above, was correct in his belief that social scientists are hesitant to collect unquantifiable, ungeneralizable data. That would help to explain the dearth of exploratory research in this area. As with his project, the data collected here were qualitative in nature and the participant selection process prohibits any extrapolation of the findings to the population at large. Such limitations are presumably common in exploratory research, and are viewed as a definite drawback. But, many seemed to have forgotten the purpose and usefulness of such research.
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is not foreign to the social scientist. In fact, if one looks to some of the more illustrious studies of the 20th century in the area of social and political behavior it is more than likely that the works of Robert Lane (Political Ideology) and the Lynds (Middletown) would top the list. These researchers studied their subjects by either adopting the role of friend/confidant/interviewer or participant observer. Why were these methods utilized? Robert Lane (1962) stated in Political Ideology that:

The ability to see things as the patient sees them is the basis of the physician's capacity to cure. Drawing upon his experience in Indian villages, Robert Redfield cautions the social scientist that he must understand the outlook of the man he studies, see things as they see them, before he can profitably employ the apparatus and objectivity of science. In this spirit I have sought in these interviews to understand these men as men, to understand the private import of what they say, to penetrate the latent meaning of their remarks, and then to see the social implications of what they have said. In this I am aided by certain features of a clinical, relaxed, conversational situation (pp.,8-9).

Lane described his interviews as being dialectical or conversational. The in-depth interview provided Lane with the opportunity "for extended probing, for pushing further into the personal meanings of cliches, and conventional phrases, for testing whether or not the first impression gained was the correct one for reflecting back the sense of
what was said to clarify the men's own thinking" (p.,9). If we are interested, as students of political behavior, in finding out how the individual perceives his or her political world, and how these perceptions influence behavior then this methodology makes perfect sense. This is especially true in cases where the researcher is attempting to gain an understanding of a complex set of interrelations influencing individual behavior, where the influence may be so subtle that prolonged questioning and sufficient probing is necessary in order to detect the process.

In order to pursue my research goals of understanding just what people understand about public opinion polls, I organized a series of small group discussions. Market research has utilized this research format for many years. In the jargon of market research, these small groups are referred to as "focus groups."

Focus group sessions are an expansion of the in-depth interview. As described by Bellenger, Bernhardt and Goldstucker (1976),

The focus group interview, or group depth interview, is a technique which grew out of the group therapy method used by psychiatrists. The concept is based on the assumption that individuals who share a problem will be more willing to talk about it amid the security of others sharing the problem. It offers a means of obtaining in-depth information on a specific topic through a discussion group atmosphere which allows an insight into the behavior and thinking of the individual group members. Rather than using a structured question-and-answer methodology, the procedure is to encourage a group to discuss feelings, atti-
attitudes, and perceptions about the topic being discussed. The focus group interview is one of the qualitative marketing research techniques developed in the 1950's in reaction to the large sample polling techniques which provided lots of numbers but little insight into what was really going on, the "why" behind the numbers" (p.,13).

There are many advantages to the focus group method. As with Lane's in-depth interview, focus groups allow for flexibility in the interview. William Wells (1974) in his description of the advantages of focus groups mentions some of the same positive features that Lane did. Both claim that by utilizing these interview techniques, the researcher is able to "listen with a third ear," trying to "achieve a grasp and intuitive understanding of what is being said" (Lane, p.8; Wells, p.3). Wells identifies another advantage that focus groups have over survey research methods. Single survey questions, argues Wells, cannot deal with contingencies very well, especially in situations where the relationships are not fairly well known and it is difficult to pick up those contingencies that link the events (p.,3).

Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Goldstucker (1976) report other advantages of focus groups:

1. Synergism - combined group effort produces a wider range of information, insight and ideas.

2. Snowballing - random comments may set off a chain reaction of responses that further feed new ideas.
3. Stimulation - the group experience itself is exciting, stimulating.

4. Spontaneity - since individuals aren't required to answer each question, the answers given become more meaningful

There are, however, some limitations associated with this methodological strategy. Self-selection is an unsurmountable problem: Individuals who are relatively more articulate and comfortable in conversing are usually more willing to attend a focus group. The views and opinions of those who decline the invitation to participate are not heard. During the group session other methodological problems emerge. Not all participants respond to each and every question posed. The discussions are informal and free-flowing, with the group members sharing their ideas and responding to the comments of others. I, as the facilitator, did not insist that each member respond to every issue discussed. Such an intrusion would have changed the atmosphere, from one that was informal and open, to one that was rigid and highly structured. Another drawback of focus groups is that one is not able to tell if the participant's comment is truly his/her's own or if the opinion expressed is a product of the group process or group pressure.
Qualitative research can be a crucial first step in the research process. The data gathered might provide the investigator with information pointing to relationships or issues never before considered. For those relationships which have been considered previously, the data might confirm the need for formal hypothesis testing, thereby laying the groundwork for future quantitative research. And, for some research questions, those which attempt to 'get inside the individual's head', to understand subtle relationships and processes, in-depth interviewing techniques might be the only appropriate method.

Many question the validity of focus group data. Reynolds and Johnson (1978) addressed this issue, asking if the usual disclaimer "qualitative research is exploratory in nature, findings should not be considered conclusive or projectable" is warranted. They cite two studies conducted by Needham, Harper and Steers Advertising, Inc. which provided the data base for comparing quantitative and qualitative methods. One study was a large scale focus group study on food shopping and food preparation, on reactions to inflation and concerns about nutrition. The second study was a nationwide life-style survey on the same topics. The results of the quantitative and qualitative studies were compared. It was found that "in only one comparable instance were qualitative and quantitative findings not
in accord. In this one instance later sales data showed the qualitative finding to be the more accurate reading of the market" (p., 112). This is not to suggest that qualitative studies should replace quantitative research, the one being more valid than the other. Rather, the point is that qualitative research methods, when applied appropriately, could be of great value to the social scientist and should be judged as to its contribution to the understanding of human behavior.

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

A total of 60 individuals participated in eleven focus groups. Equal numbers of men and women were involved. Again, it should be noted that the sample is not representative of the general population. Participation was skewed to highly educated, articulate, professionals who exhibited moderate to intense interest in politics and public affairs. Although measures were taken to ensure that variance in age, education, and media use would be adequately represented this was somewhat problematic. Self-selection occurred where those who were more interested in politics and comfortable in discussing such matters with others were more likely to show up for their scheduled group. Diverse backgrounds were sought and the sample does reflect
variations in education, occupation, age, media use, and gender. The participant list in the Appendix illustrates this diversity among the sample.

In order to identify potential participants for the small group discussions, preliminary telephone interviews were conducted. One random sample of telephone numbers was drawn from the Columbus, Ohio and Vicinity Telephone Directory. The last two digits of each telephone number were randomized in order to permit new and unlisted numbers to be included in the sample. Another sample was drawn from the list of Columbus New York Times subscribers. Readers of the Times were assumed to be, relatively, more politically interested and would thereby pay more attention to campaign related news stories and political polls. Times subscribers were not treated as a separate group. They were selected only to ensure that these types of individuals (exposed to national newspaper) would be present.

Interviewers were instructed to talk to adults, 18 years of age or older. Telephoning was conducted weeknights and weekends. A total of 886 adults were initially interviewed. Respondents were evaluated as to their degree of

(3) Columbus is a good setting for such a study. It has been referred to as the "All American City". During the 1972 Presidential primaries, ABC had selected Columbus, Ohio as being representative of the nation and followed the trends and preferences voiced by the citizens of that community (Crouse, p., 132). For those same reasons of representation, Columbus is one of the major test markets for new products.
interest in some pre-selected issues and their willingness to participate in a focus group session. Of the 886 interviewed, 335 respondents (38%) indicated an interest in participating (irrespective of whether or not they qualified on the issues test).

Eventually, 80 women and 41 men were scheduled for focus group sessions. They were promised $10 honorariums for attending. Reminder phone calls were made on the eve of each scheduled session in addition to a letter sent approximately one week prior to the meeting which stated the time, date, and location of the meeting. In the end, 30 men and 30 women actually participated in the discussion groups. Fourteen of the participants (18%) were subscribers of the New York Times. As is indicated by these figures, women were more likely than men to agree to participate and later not show for their scheduled group.

CONDUCT OF SESSIONS

Focus group sessions were held in the Ohio State University's Behavioral Sciences Laboratory. The room reserved for the group sessions was equipped with a two-way mirror behind which was audio-visual equipment. A technician audio-taped each group session. Group participants were told from the outset that their conversations would be taped recorded. They were asked for their permission to tape and were assured that confidentiality would be
observed, in that their full names would never be divulged. The proceedings were taped on dual tracks enabling the technician to identify each participant as he or she spoke.

Participants were guided through the discussions by a group facilitator. I, the facilitator, led all eleven sessions. The atmosphere was purposely informal, in hopes that such an environment would encourage open and free exchange of ideas. It was essential that the participants communicate with each other, for it was through such an exchange, with people similar to themselves, using their everyday language, that I hoped to gain insight into their thinking about polls.

All participants were informed over the telephone, in the reminder letter, and at the beginning of the session that the discussions would provide data for my doctoral research project. They were told that my research concerned politics and the media: what people thought about the campaigns and the performance of the media. Only at the end of the session were they told that the American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC) had provided the funding for the project.

The focus group sessions were scheduled during the months of March - May 1984. This was the height of the Democratic primaries, hence most participants were eager to voice their political views and concerns. The first 30-40
minutes of the focus group discussion centered on the 1984 Presidential election. Participants were asked to share their views about the various candidates and their chances of electoral success, the media coverage of the campaigns, President Reagan's popularity, etc. It was believed best to start the group talking about a topic that was salient and general enough so that all could participate. This afforded the members an opportunity to acclimate themselves to the focus group environment. After I sensed that the members were relaxed I then proceeded to ask questions about public opinion polls.

The participants considered nine different types of polls (APPENDIX):

1. Network exit polls and early projections
2. Political Polls (generic)
3. USA Today, "Voices From Across America" (man-in-the-street interview)
4. Columbus Dispatch "Best Sellers Book List"
5. Columbus Dispatch "Best of Columbus" poll (mail in survey)
6. Nielsen Ratings (ratings of television programs)
7. USA Today, "Woman in the White House" (Epcot Center/Disney World poll, methodology not specified)
8. USA Today, "How We Rate Lawyers" (Gordon Black poll, methodology specified)
9. Congressional Representative's questionnaire (mail questionnaire from U.S. Representative).

For each of the above listed polls (which were reviewed sequentially) the group members were asked four general questions. First, it was asked whether or not the poll being reviewed was in fact a public opinion poll. Second, opinions were elicited as to whether or not the participants would view the particular poll as being credible. They were also asked whether or not they had, in the past, or would in the future, pay attention to a poll similar to the one under review. Lastly, they were asked whether they themselves, or others, might be influenced by the information contained in the poll.

As will become evident from the excerpted conversations reported, participants very frequently engaged in interesting and provocative arguments/discussions with minimal input or direction from me. Clearly, one definite benefit of employing this methodology was the quality of the data collected. Group members questioned each other, asked for clarification, shared personal experiences, and built upon the ideas and experiences expressed by their fellow group members. Some members actually attempted and were successful at pulling together theirs and others' experiences, making comparisons, and then theorizing about some criti-
cal issues of the day. The group dynamic was an essential factor. This interaction would not have been possible with a closed-ended questionnaire or in-depth interviewing. Once involved in the discussion, many participants became quite energetic and excited about sharing their views. Many sessions lasted past the 90 minute limit and had to be ended by the facilitator. Even then some members remained and continued to talk with others. This was especially the case with a couple of the female groups. They indicated great satisfaction with the session and the opportunity to discuss and argue politics with other interested females. On a number of occasions I had to interrupt a conversation, asking the participants to take turns speaking so that the technician would be able to keep up with the conversation. In virtually every group, at least one individual did not participate fully, whether it was due to language difficulties, shyness, or insecurity.

After the discussion period, participants were asked to fill out a rather brief questionnaire (APPENDIX). The entire session lasted approximately 2 hours, from start to finish.
DATA ANALYSIS

Each of the taped conversations was transcribed, resulting in a voluminous product. Matrices were constructed for the purpose of data analysis, one matrix being developed for each of the four questions posed. The names of the participants were listed down the left side of each matrix with the specific polls running across the top of the matrix. Participant's comments were recorded in the appropriate cell for each one of the polls reviewed. In the end, there were four rather large matrices, each one representing the opinions expressed in response to each of the four general questions.

Realizing that the analysis of qualitative data can be highly subjective, great care was taken to ensure that some structure was imposed on this process. The matrices were invaluable in that they helped to identify the dominant themes and relationships that emerged through the fieldwork. By scanning the cells of each matrix, I was able to detect the major concerns and issues raised by the group participants. It is around those issues that the data analysis chapters are organized. I have been careful to state approximations of how many participants raised a particular issue that is mentioned. In instances where only a couple of group members raised an issue, it is reported as such. Again, the most important consideration in the
reporting of the data was to integrate participant's comments and responses into existing bodies of knowledge and to identify those issues which provide new insights into the relationship between individuals, the public, society, democratic processes, and public opinion polls.
Chapter III
WHAT IS A PUBLIC OPINION POLL

INTRODUCTION
What is a public opinion poll? For public opinion researchers and practitioners alike, an agreed upon definition of what would constitute a public opinion poll would probably pose no problem. Certainly, phrases such as "scientific method", "public issues", "random sample", and the like would be included in most academic or expert definitions offered. Arguments might ensue over some rather esoteric concepts and principles of polling but, in the end, consensus rather than dissensus would prevail. For professionals educated and trained according to the precepts of the scientific method of opinion research the evaluation of what constitutes a reliable and valid poll is fairly clear. Basically, did the methods employed, at all stages of the survey, adhere to certain prescribed principles? As most researchers and practitioners know, there are a number of polls, pollsters, and polling organizations who, at times, do not follow such methods; the resultant polls therefore would naturally be deemed unscientific, unreliable and invalid.
The knowledge required to evaluate public opinion polls is not intellectually prohibitive, so that only a handful of learned scholars and experts possess the necessary evaluative skills. In fact, the basic methods and rationale of public opinion polling could be, and in some colleges are, explained to and easily understood by most undergraduates. Similar information is also disseminated to the public. In recent years, many of the nationally known pollsters and polling organizations have included information about the methods employed along with their poll results. It is not uncommon to read or hear about sample size, type of sample, method of selection, margin of error, etc. of a particular poll.

One might argue that two empirically ungrounded assumptions have had a definite impact on opinion research. Apparently, there is an assumption that the public not only understands, but is able to utilize this methodological information in their appraisal of the poll and its results. Professional pollsters are not the only ones who attribute this bundle of knowledge to the public. A cursory review of some recent books on public opinion polling reflect a similar belief about the public's interest in and knowledge about modern polling techniques. This is evident in the writings of Bogart (1972), and Roll and Cantril (1972). Bogart states:
An entire generation of Americans now have grown up accepting polling as a commonplace institution and poll findings as part of the normal daily flow of expected information. Awareness of the statistical measurements of survey findings coexists with the individual's own intuitive assessments of what people are thinking and saying (p.,15).

In the same year Roll and Cantril were calling for more sophisticated analysis of polling data believing that the public was quite ready for such information. They praised the common man's ability to understand, what was then a fairly new phenomenon: polling. In 1972 they wrote, "Now that the public has become more knowledgeable about the interpretations of poll data..." These are profoundly serious assumptions: That the citizenry has the awareness and technical sophistication needed to correctly interpret the myriad of published polls. But, are these assumptions correct? This question must be addressed. Considering the amount of research devoted to the study of poll effects on the individual, it is surprising that little research effort has been directed towards understanding how the individual perceives and utilizes poll information. Public opinion researchers need to reflect upon some of the assumptions they've made about the public and how these beliefs have guided (or misguided) recent public opinion research.

Should we assume that the public interprets, appraises, and utilizes polls and poll results in the same manner as
do the more sophisticated professionals and researchers? And, is it correct, not to mention realistic, to assume that the public would agree with our expert definitions of what is a public opinion poll? Just how much do individuals know about polling methods and principles? Are they able to determine which polls are valid and which are not? Is such information utilized in the evaluation of polls? Are scientific polls the only polls that people attend to? If so, do they ignore and/or dismiss non-scientific polls? Very little is known about the way in which the public, more specifically the individual, perceives public opinion polls and makes use of the information provided. As scholars, if we are intent on studying polls and the public (especially attitudinal/behavioral effects of poll results), is it not essential that we make an attempt to understand how people use polls and poll information in their everyday lives?

Secondly, it appears that most researchers studying polls and the public tend to view public opinion polls as a monolithic entity. To be a poll, the survey methods must have followed the dictates of the scientific method, so that, for most researchers, a poll, by its very definition, is scientific. This is clearly evident when one looks at the body of effects research which has concentrated solely on the effects of legitimate, scientific poll results on
individual attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. It might come as a shock to many opinion scholars to learn that there are many unscientific polls being reported and publicized everyday that might in fact have just as much of an influence or effect on the public. Perhaps the public doesn't distinguish between the scientific and non-scientific and might believe that, to borrow from Ms. Stein, "A poll, is a poll, is a poll".

To date, there appears to be very little research on the subject of the individual's perceptions, use, and understanding of polls and polling techniques. This work is an attempt at correcting this intellectual oversight. Before discussing some of the research findings a brief explication and rationale for the methodology employed will be presented. The major methodological strategy has already been described at length in Chapter 2. What follows is a description of the strategy that was adopted to address the specific question, "What is a public opinion poll?" The following two chapters deal with the questions of perceived credibility of various polls and the utilization of poll data, with special attention being paid to political polls in Chapter 5.
DISCUSSION GROUP QUESTIONS

Various types of polls or poll-like items were used as stimuli, to evoke from participants their own evaluations. For, if we want to gain a better understanding of the relationship between polls, their results, and the public it behooves us to go directly to the proverbial "Horse's mouth." Rather than operating on the basis of a number of questionable assumptions about the public we can, by asking some fairly straightforward questions, allow people in their own language to describe and explain some of their perceptions about public opinion polls and polling.

This chapter will report the results of the group discussions concerning what is and what is not a public opinion poll. The relevant post-discussion group questionnaire items also are reported. During the group sessions, seven different news items were passed out and sequentially discussed (APPENDIX). Only some of the items would 'pass' the experts' test and hence be classified as valid, scientific polls. However, evaluations were left to the group participants. Discussions as to whether or not an item should be considered a public opinion poll were very enlightening, especially comments outlining what criteria should be utilized in evaluating polls. The seven news items were:

1. USA Today, "Voices From Across America" (man-in-the-street interview)
2. Columbus Dispatch "Best Sellers Book List"
An attempt was made to identify remarks and comments which appeared to indicate a modicum of sophistication on the part of the participants with regards to polls and polling methodology. It should be noted that the description of the group participants as being either unsophisticated or relatively sophisticated was based on subjective criteria. However, this distinction between sophisticates and the less sophisticated does not tell the whole story. In analyzing the responses it became quite apparent that a simple dichotomous breakdown would obfuscate some of the more fascinating findings of this research. It wasn't simply the case that some participants were 'smarter' than others and were able to talk about public opinion polling using the jargon of professionals. More was at work. As expected those who were, through their education or training, familiar with research methodology exhibited a great-
er understanding of public opinion polling and the interpretation of poll results. What was surprising was that those who would be classified as less sophisticated vis-à-vis their understanding of the methods and techniques of polling were often the ones who touched upon some of the subtleties and complexities of opinion measurement. They brought to the forefront some issues and concerns that are frequently addressed by those engaged in public opinion research. Without having the technical expertise or knowledge of their cohorts these less "sophisticated" participants approached the stimuli from a very different perspective. It was from this relatively "naive" perspective that they made a number of significant, insightful, and provocative remarks and criticisms. Apparently, those familiar with the methodology of polling focused almost entirely on the survey methods. They could not, or chose not to, see past those types of problems. In comparison, those participants lacking such a background were forced to draw on their personal experiences with polls and their "gut" reactions. Therefore, I would argue that the sophistication dichotomy is only useful in discussions focusing on participants understanding of the more technical aspects of polling - sampling, margin of error, and the like.
FINDINGS

Participants were generally uninformed and/or misinformed about the rules and methods of polling. It is safe to say that there existed, among the group participants, a rather low level of information about proper, that is, scientific methods of public opinion polling. Men exhibited comparatively more knowledge about what actually constitutes a public opinion poll than did women. This observed difference is most probably due to the gap in the occupational and educational backgrounds between participating males and females. Many of the males were professionals or students, having had some exposure to the principles of probability theory, sampling, etc. Most of the women did not have comparable experiences.

Comments elicited about the various polls ranged from the more standard, expected responses to some unexpected, insightful, and provocative remarks. When asked to evaluate each of the seven items the criteria applied by some of the respondents indicated a fair level of poll sophistication. It is also interesting to note that some degree of confusion was evident with regard to the more technical jargon of survey research. Some participants, possibly following the lead of the more vocal and presumably more knowledgeable participants, would volunteer comments about a specific poll using technical polling vocabulary (sample
size, margin of error, etc.) yet it was quite obvious that they did not understand the concept or principles they alluded to. This was telling in itself, and points to the danger of employing inappropriate methods, such as content analysis or closed-ended questionnaires, which might have overlooked or masked this finding. For the most part, the standards applied to each poll item were, by and large, quite similar to the methodological information reported by the more reputable pollsters along with their poll results. For these participants who subjected the polls to such objective criteria, determination of poll validity usually hinged upon the evaluation of the sample size, sampling method, representativeness of the sample, and occasionally the margin of error.

SAMPLING CONCERNS

SAMPLE SIZE

"Voices From Across America" published by USA Today on a daily basis is essentially a man-in-the-street interview. Presented are the opinions of seven individuals from various regions of the United States. Fewer than half of the group participants commented on the paltry sample size. Some, in fact, offered positive evaluations of the sample size and believed that the sample was representative of the public because as one participant pointed out, "There's a
variety of backgrounds, ages, and opinions." USA Today's efforts to represent various occupations, regions, ages, and racial/ethnic backgrounds thereby giving the impression that all walks of American life are being truly represented by these seven individuals apparently had some readers convinced that that was the case.

A few participants seemed to believe that the original sample size was larger than seven: What appeared in print were the responses of individuals who were either representative of the sample population, or selected comments that proved to be entertaining and captivating. As they described it:

And probably they tried to get in one of all the different types of opinions they found even if one opinion was only two percent of what they found. They'd stick that in because it is a different opinion.--------Steve3

It's a random sampling it looks like. But how do we know how many people were interviewed before they printed something that is readable?--------Diane2

How do you know that they didn't pick six people that they already knew that would allow them a certain...X amount of dollars, for them to put their names there.--------Devonna

How do we know that they didn't pick out the seven opinions that they wanted to hear: that the pollster wanted to project?--------Pat
There are probably other people's opinions also...but their opinions aren't in here.-------Mark

However some of the more sophisticated participants were highly critical of the minute sample and on that basis alone declared the poll invalid. These individuals, as is evident from their comments, have some degree of understanding about polling and the need for a representative sample:

Definitely you have too small of a sample. If you know anything about statistics you can't say, "Well, these seven people have this opinion." This doesn't tell me anything about the general population. You're associating this face and this is what they're saying. It's interesting, you're getting somebody's point of view, but that's about it. It's not telling you anything....In a country with a population of 200 odd million people, seven people does not...I mean statistically is meaningless.-------Kathy

It's not a scientific poll and it's only seven people so you can't say it's statistical. We usually think of a poll as a statistical collection that's done with rigorous mathematical adjustments for sampling error and that sort of thing. We're talking about Gallup's polls and Caddell's polls. That's certainly a lot different than seven people asked their point of view on March 7th, 1984.-------Dana

It's a poll. Wouldn't it be a random sampling of Ohio, North Carolina, etc?-------Cindy

I thought a public opinion poll involved more people and a bigger percentage of the public.-------Ester

Discussions about the "Woman in the White House" poll proved to be quite illuminating. Although the representa-
tiveness of the "Woman in the White House" poll was questioned by some, many believed that the poll was in fact a bona fide public opinion poll because of its extremely large sample size of 15,000. The more critical participants voiced concern that no information was provided explaining the sampling method. Poll source was reported, and the responsible party was The Epcot Center/Disney World. Whether or not the poll was conducted at Epcot Center/Disney World or by the marketing division of that corporation was not clear. This lack of information allowed some to infer that the poll, in fact, was conducted at Epcot/Disney World. If that was the case, they argued that the 15,000 sample size was irrelevant because the sample would be biased, overrepresenting the Southeast region of the United States and the affluent:

Walt Disney World/Epcot Poll? Does that mean it was taken in Florida? Fifteen thousand white, middle class Americans who all have the money to go down to Florida, who earn $30,000 - $40,000 per year? It (the poll) doesn't mean a thing.--------David

These are people who can afford to go to the amusement park. Those who can afford to go to Florida or live in Florida. More people who live in the south.--------Dawn

Sure, fifteen thousand people. If you walk into the Democratic Convention you can get a sample of 5,000 - 6,000 people but it's not a poll. I would say it's a poll of people who can afford to go to Florida on vacation.--------Bill
Or Florida residents.-------Someone

You can't get a truly representative poll, I don't think.-------Bill

You call that an election.-------Someone

But even then it's not truly representative because it's only those who want to go and vote.-------Bill

Well, I'd like to see the same thing done at Disneyland, and then I think you'd see different results.-------Doug

So, for some, the extremely large sample did not over-ride these other problems, while for others there was a belief that with 15,000 people one is apt to come across all types of people representing various ages, occupations, regions, ethnicities, etc. As they saw it:

Fifteen thousand people surveyed. When I see big numbers like that I start thinking that it's impossible for it to be...I'm getting naive here, but anyway, if it really is 15,000 people it would be hard for them to be off.-------Dick

I would want to think a lot about what issues covered, who was asked, how they were asked. I'm naive like you, you get 15,000 people to respond and I'm going to say, okay, there's some validity. It's sort of hard to fix 15,000 answers unless you go around and very carefully select them.-------Ken

I like the sample, it's good. I'm trying to figure out the people who would be going through Walt Disney's gates. There are a lot of different people who go down there. I don't think that they are just families or housewives. I think that there are a lot of people who visit there. So, I'm right now saying, "that isn't bad, that's a lot of people."-------John
I think it would be (a public opinion poll) because I've been to Epcot not too long ago and there are so many people from all over the world.--------Eunice

Interestingly enough, not only were the less sophisticated convinced of the poll's validity because of its impressive sample size but so were a number of the more educated, professional participants. In reading their comments, one can't help taking notice of their failure to critically evaluate the poll. No mention was made of the lack of sampling information, demographic breakdowns, and other relevant data.

SAMPLE SELECTION AND RESPONSE BIAS

The "Woman in the White House" poll was not the only poll to come under attack on this count. The Congressional poll was criticized by some as was the "Best of Columbus" survey. With the "Congressional" poll some argued those who are supporters of the Representative would be more likely than others in the district to respond to the mail questionnaire, thereby skewing the results to the supportive constituents:

One of the things Wylie (Congressional Representative) should do to make his questionnaires' be representative of his constituents is to have his constituencies say whether they are Democrats or Republicans because I think there is a bias and that the constituencies that vote for him will be more likely to answer his questionnaire.-------- Dana
I think they get a real skewed sampling. I think they tend to get responses from people who are already supportive of their policies.--------Michael

It's a public opinion poll but I think it's going to be slanted. I think people who are interested, or Republican, are people who are going to answer this. They are going to be a certain type of person that has the time to do this and are interested.--------Mary2

If you could be assured that the responses that you got clearly was a representation of his district...but, if it's only 10% - 20%, it's only a subset of that he's interested in and you can't generalize from that and say that in the 15th District this is what my constituents are worried about. It's the same thing with the telephone or if they meet him on Broad and High or people call in over the telephone. One of the local stations does that all the time. All those people call in.--------Robert

I just think from the standpoint of the constituents, it's a simple enough poll. I don't think you want to make it that complex, to confuse people.--------Someone

But it might not accurately reflect the constituents of his district. The only way from a research standpoint, the only way you could have a true opinion poll of the constituents of his district would be to...like what the Times does or CBS or whatever...is to segment the people and get X number of people that are single, black, married, women, whatever to give you a true sample.--------David

Some however, were more concerned with the initial distribution of the questionnaires than they were with the
response rate or potentiality of response bias. At first, being uncertain about the method of questionnaire distribution, they were somewhat critical of the Congressional poll. But, as their comments indicate, after being assured that every house in the district receives the survey, they soon acquiesced:

This is what I don't like about public opinion. This Wylie is a Republican and he probably only sends this to Republicans.-------Cynthia

The other thing you have to know is who did he send it to?-------Roger

Every household in the district.-------Group Leader

That's a lot closer to the scientific. It has a scientific basis.-------Roger

A few participants alluded to the impact that issue salience might have on the response rate and representativeness of the Congressional poll:

This is going to be skewed one way or another just based on who's interested in it. You're (going to have the) opinion of people who care and that can vary from time to time from 10% of the population to 40% or 50% or 90%.--------Scott

If people are like I am, and that unless I'm really interested in a subject I wouldn't give an answer. And I have answered numerous ones, and numerous ones I have copped out because I could've cared less. But those that I was really concerned about I took time to answer and send back in.--------Maryl
Then again, the people who send it back in are the people who care and the people who are pretty valuable to know.--------Dawn

The "Best of Columbus" poll results were also subject to criticism. It was suggested that only those who read the Sunday Columbus Dispatch and that specific section of the paper would have the opportunity of responding. It was also noted that with these mail questionnaires a certain amount of effort on the part of the respondent is required: An activity the average person will not engage in, therefore the results of these polls represent the opinions of atypical individuals.

As far as sample size and selection were concerned, most were ignorant as to the statistical theories and principles which guide pollsters. Numbers were viewed as an important criteria, that is, the more interviewed the better regardless of selection methods. And, as previously stated, the Epcot Center/Disney World poll with 15,000 respondents was perceived to be, by many, a valid public opinion poll. In fact, when asked to compare this poll with the "How We Rate Lawyers" poll—a poll reporting a randomly selected sample of 807 adults nationwide—some still perceived the Epcot Center/Disney World poll as being superior solely on account of its impressive sample size.

Randomness of the sample was also an issue for some. One of the tenets of scientific polling is that the sample
be selected in a random manner. However, this cardinal rule of polling was not well understood. Excluding the handful of sophisticates, who exhibited a fair amount of knowledge about the ins and outs of polling, most of the others were blatantly misinformed or silent when it came to critical assessments of sample selection. To illustrate the problem of misinformation and/or incorrect use of polling jargon, this comment, stated quite authoritatively, is quite illuminating:

If this (Lawyers poll) were in my statistics class and we were asked to evaluate it we'd say "no", it's not a good poll. It has a small sample (807) taken at random and we would not accept it.--------Scott

I feel it's a random selection.--------Chris

So you think that if the participants are selected randomly that it is not a good public opinion poll.--------Group leader

For these individuals randomness appears to connote reckless, slipshod methods. Another confused participant believed that:

The 15,000 sample was better at Epcot Center because there's more different kinds of people than the 807 from all over the country.

Another participant believed that the Congressional poll had a random sample. As she explained it:

It would be a random sampling because you wouldn't know who sent them back.--------Diane2
So, although some participants used the jargon of polling quite freely and comfortably, it was apparent that not in all cases did they possess an understanding of the principles involved.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics was also of some concern in the evaluation of the polls. Again, a minority consisting of the relatively more sophisticated participants were cognizant of the need for more detailed information about the sample's demographic breakdown. Their cautious interpretation of the polls indicated that the presence or lack of demographic information did enter into their appraisal of the poll's validity. For example, a few mentioned that the "Woman in the White House" poll was deceptive in that it did not specify the method of respondent selection and neglected to provide male/female breakdowns. Concern was voiced that a sample overrepresenting females would definitely bias the results:

Fifteen thousand people. I wonder if that could be a bunch of women. There's no background on it at all, who those 15,000 people were.-------Chris

Age and sex questionnaire items were included in the Congressional poll and were viewed positively by some participants for it provided them with additional information about the sample. As reported in the previous section, a few did comment that due to the nature of the Congressional
poll respondent's partisanship should've been asked. However, as with the other aforementioned criteria, only a minority, far less than half of the participants used this criterion in evaluating the polls.

QUESTION WORDING
The only poll that came under heavy criticism because of its unfairly worded questions was the Congressional poll. It should be noted that question wording was not an issue for some of the other polls (e.g. "Voices from Across America", Columbus Dispatch Best Sellers List, "Woman in the White House" poll, or the Nielsen Ratings) because of the respective formats of these polls. Those who criticized the Congressional poll were quite vehement:

These things are always so loaded. I always mail them back with comments written all over it. The way he asks the questions is so biased.-------Steven

His questions are very slanted. Not only that but his first two pages are telling you what his opinion is and why he thinks that. So, if you read that you already have all these valid arguments for his side and that will slant this questionnaire.------Leslie

Although Congressional polls have gained notoriety through the years because of their questionable methods and political use of the "poll" results this particular questionnaire was not as blatantly biased as most others. In light of that, the responses were intriguing. Most of the comments
critical of the Congressional poll were not directed at the questionnaire under review but were referring to "these types of polls" in general. Apparently, a number of participants were negatively predisposed to polls of this type making an objective evaluation of the poll at hand almost impossible. Possibly, these individuals have developed cognitive scripts or schemas when it comes to Congressional polls and rather than confront such entities in an objective manner they immediately call forth the appropriate schemas. (4) However, one participant did comment that although there are problems associated with polls of this type, he saw nothing particularly biased with this particular Congressional poll:

I'd like to defend this a bit if I may. I think that the point you're making is true. It's not a random sample of people...I think it's better for Congresspeople to ask than not to ask. For example, look at question #7. I don't know if you'd consider that biased or not. It's saying, "in your view what are the most important national problems?" and you can check something there, and it includes 'other'. That is not necessarily terribly biased....-------Dick

Fewer than ten of the respondents raised questions about the problematic question wording.

One poll was singled out for its exemplary questionnaire wording and design. One participant described the "Lawyers" poll as being more "refined" because it addressed

(4) Much work has been done in this field. This author is most familiar with the works of Abelson and the more recent work of Graber who applies schema theory to the processing of political news.
both the negative and positive attributes of attorneys.

**POLL SPONSORSHIP**

Interestingly, poll sponsorship was often a factor in the evaluation of whether or not the item under consideration should be considered to be a public opinion poll. This was beautifully illustrated by the Nielsen poll. When asked if the Nielsen Ratings were a public opinion poll, most said yes, with very little hesitation. Through the course of conversation, it became quite apparent that there existed a fair amount of confusion about the methods employed by A.C. Nielsen and Company. Questions arose as to the number of Nielsen families interviewed or monitored; the hook-up of the 'black box' to the television set; the use of diaries; the regional representation of the sample; etc. Yet, almost without exception, all agreed that the Nielsen ratings were a poll. Why? Because it was done by A.C. Nielsen and Company!

An interesting comparison can be made between the evaluation of the Nielsen ratings and the "Lawyers" poll. Of all the poll items discussed, the "Lawyers" poll presented the reader with the most detailed information about how the poll was conducted. In fact, a separate article titled, "About the Poll", was printed adjacent to the poll results. Included was the name of the polling organization who had conducted the survey. Very few participants made mention
of the sponsorship of this poll indicating that for most it was not of prime consideration. Only a couple of participants commented on the reputability of the Gordon Black organization. One commented "Supposedly a reputable firm" whereas another more cautiously stated: "You still don't know who the Gordon Black organization is." This might be interpreted to mean that poll sponsorship is more of a factor in the evaluation of polls where the polling organization has a national reputation. That is, in cases where the name of the polling organization is a household name and is virtually synonymous with the activity of polling (e.g. Gallup, Harris, Caddell, Nielsen).

MARGIN OF ERROR

Only a handful of the participants understood and questioned the margin or error associated with the various polls. The "Lawyers" poll was the only one to state a margin of error. Not many participants took note of this. Those mentioning this statistic as being part of their evaluative criteria commented:

This was the first poll we've seen that says what the sample was and the error....------Dawn

This one gives an explanation that says not only what kind of selection they had but it specifies that it was random... that what the margin of error it has. Anybody that has any statistics knows that this is true.-------Steve3
It tells you a little bit about how it was conducted—who they asked, it has the margin of error...I don't know how you would interpret them or use them, but yes I would consider it a poll.--------Steve2

In discussing what information one looks for in evaluating a poll one female participant mentioned a local newspaper's practice of stating the margin of error and how the inclusion of this information indicates to her that the poll followed some rigorous procedures and should be viewed as a valid public opinion poll:

That (statement of the margin of error) would make me think that they've done something to make it good...that they could even compute it.--------Leslie

The local newspaper referred to conducts a mail survey and has come under criticism from local pollsters and public opinion experts for their statement of a margin of error, a statistical statement that is impossible to calculate for a mail survey. Yet, it appears that for some the statement of the margin of error alone acts as a cue telling them that the poll is scientifically accurate.

One has to wonder whether margin of error would've been an issue in the evaluation of the polls if it hadn't been stated along with the "Lawyers" poll. One participant lamented the absence of this statistic when scrutinizing the "Woman in the White House" poll: A poll where some mention of the margin of error would have been appropriate (this might also apply to the Nielsen ratings). This par-
participant would be considered fairly sophisticated in his understanding of polling, as he readily admits:

Where does it ("Woman in the White House" poll) say here that there's a minus or plus percentage of error? Maybe we're different, maybe because I've done research and teach it and have a Ph.D. maybe I'm more prone to look at those kinds of things than the average person. I don't know.-------David

For the most part, confusion reigned when margin or error was mentioned. Very few understood this mathematical/statistical concept. As one aghast participant inquired, "How can you have error in a poll?" Error was the word keyed on and not surprisingly was perceived as a negative attribute of the poll. Those who understood margin of error were the few who dealt with statistics in their work or school environment.

In summary, only a minority (far less than half) of the participants evaluated the seven poll items in any rigorous fashion. For the most part, these individuals looked for information that would describe such things as sample size, method of sampling, question wording, and poll sponsor. Often these participants lamented that no such information was available, thereby making their evaluations difficult and highly speculative. The seeking of such information and the use of this information, when available, as cri-
criteria for judging polls indicated a relatively sophisticated approach to polls and the interpretation of poll results. As for some of the less sophisticated, as the discussion wore on they began to adopt the criteria used by their more astute cohorts. But, as mentioned previously, their lack of concrete knowledge was detectable when they were pressed to elaborate. As some of the comments suggest, they appeared to be hopelessly confused, giving muddled explanations about the question under discussion. (Of course, if one can be allowed to play optimist, a case could be made that the discussion did perform an educative function of sorts in that after two hours of talking about public opinion polls, it's likely that some left with more knowledge than they had arrived with).

As stated earlier, the criteria used in evaluating the various polls ranged from the mundane, technically-oriented to the more provocative. Some comments about public opinion polls proved to be quite insightful and indicated a sensitivity to the subtleties and theoretical concerns of public opinion and its measurement. However, before delving into the more thought provoking perceptions, a discussion of some of the other issues raised concerning presentation style, response categories, and other related topics will be presented. Many of the comments volunteered, although technique-related, brought to the forefront some
issues that are of great concern to public opinion scholars and practitioners.

PRESENTATION STYLE
Presentation style (that is, how the poll results appeared in print) was taken into consideration during the evaluative process. How the poll looked to the participant, its format, accompanying graphics, newspaper column subheadings, and so on all had an impact on the participants, and in some instances precipitated an immediate evaluation of the poll even before the contents were scrutinized. This was evident in the evaluations of the "Woman in the White House" poll where some downgraded it because of the presentation style. The accompanying graphics (something USA Today is known for) which happened to be a cartoon of a female holding a gavel in the White House, was overlaid on the part of the news item reporting the poll results. A number of participants commented that the cartoon made the poll appear less important and that the poll results might not be taken seriously by readers. The discussion of these three group members illustrates how presentation style influences one's evaluation of a poll:

In the first place, I had trouble with the way it's set up here. I had trouble when I first looked at it. Why don't they have the answers right across...?------David

The source, that should've been up...it's kind of at the bottom here where they got the source from.-------Mark
And here, someone even thought it was a joke!--------Ben

Practitioners might find it prudent to pay heed to such comments. Apparently, this sort of fluff marketing detracts from the poll's credibility.

Another participant proclaiming she was an avid reader of USA Today mentioned that because she is familiar with that paper's use of Census data and other poll information, she tended to view poll items appearing in USA Today as being bona fide public opinion polls. USA Today's daily feature "USA Snapshots" which appears on the front page has a subheading "Statistics That Shape The Nation." The "Woman in the White House" poll was the featured "Snapshot" for March 7, 1984. This particular subheading provided a cue for at least one participant. As she explained it:

Looking at the "Woman in the White House"...if you look at the caption underneath the "USA Snapshot" it says "Statistics that Shape the Nation." That influences me more than looking down and seeing that the source is Walt Disney World. It's something that I focused right in on which made me go down and read the article.--------Olivia

Two participants raised interesting points about the presentation and placement of the "Voices From Across America" story. Neither of them considered it to be a public opinion poll stating two very different reasons. For one participant the response style (the paragraph form response) conflicted with her idea of how poll results
should be reported. Her comments suggested that she is inclined to view the results of closed-ended questions, reporting percentages, as being public opinion polls but not so the more verbose, open-ended responses. From an information processing perspective her distinction makes sense. The individual would expend relatively less time and energy in interpreting and assimilating such information reported as percentages corresponding to a set number of response categories.

For another group member the section of the newspaper in which "Voices From Across America" interviews appeared was a factor in his appraisal. Because the item was relegated to the editorial page he viewed it as such: As a seven-person editorial:

I believe it is also part of the editorial page. I think that signifies an important point also. This is an editorial comment or maybe an editorial of these people. That's what they think, but it isn't an opinion poll per se.-------Simon

RESPONSE CATEGORIES

A few touched upon a very real problem in opinion measurement. How can opinions on extremely salient issues of the day be measured by simple yes/no responses? Perceptive participants argued that responses elicited from closed-ended questions, where the respondent need only reply with a yes or no, or agree or disagree, were misleading. Some respondents, they feared, might not have a sufficient
knowledge base from which to formulate an intelligent well-thought out answer. Yet, because of the already provided simplistic response categories, and the individual's unwillingness to sound uninformed, or worse yet, stupid, a respondent will most likely answer the question with one of the provided responses. In discussing the "Lawyers" poll some commented:

You wonder how many of these people knew lawyers, and from where did they get their opinions. What are they basing their opinions on?-------Diane2

How many of these people have been to lawyers? Who knows? And how many adults have really interacted with lawyers? How do you know that these 807 have had enough knowledge of a lawyer to say that?-------John

Well, they hear from friends.------Jack

Yes, this is what they believe. It's their beliefs.-------John

Those intimately involved with polls and polling procedures are all too familiar with this fundamental problem associated with opinion measurement.

Also mentioned was the lack of "don't know" categories of some polls. A couple of participants were dismayed because they believed that important information about the sample was thereby hidden. In appraising the "Lawyers" poll one participant stated "They include unsure here. The uncommitted or unsure are always an element that's important."
Criticisms concerning "don't know" responses and those targeted at the forced-response, closed-ended questions, which attempt to measure public opinion when in actuality they are not satisfactorily distinguishing informed responses from top of the head responses, indicated an unexpected degree of sensitivity on the part of a few participants to the problems of opinion measurement. These concerns led some to declare that although a poll appeared to be valid and did follow the dictates of the scientific method of opinion polling, one could never be satisfied that Real public opinion was ascertained. As Schorris (1978) argues in, "Market Democracy", the procedures of market research have been adopted by pollsters and opinion researchers and applied to social issue research without serious consideration of the assumptions, implications, and ramifications of such methods. Asking a citizen his or her opinion on such relevant and highly complicated issues as nuclear war, foreign trade, international relations, or government spending in the same manner one would ask questions about preferences for commodities such as toothpaste and underarm deodorant is a trivialization and simplification of important social issues resulting in a superficial and possibly incorrect measure of the public's opinion.
INTERVIEWER BIAS AND SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

The question of interviewer bias was raised while discussing the "Woman in the White House" poll. One male participant believed that men asked that question might be unduly influenced by the sex of the interviewer. As evidenced by his comments, a recent personal experience had sensitized this participant to this problem:

A few days ago near Nationwide there were some young ladies with OSU badges on. This was at 3:45 and they were standing there and asking people as they were coming out of the bank that they were taking a random survey. They wanted to know if you'd vote for a woman President if there was one to vote for. I'm not saying they did this purposely or if it was bad timing on their part or not, but what comes out of Nationwide at 3:45 each evening? Workers. What's 3/4 of your workers? Female. Prior to Monday I would have read this ("Woman in the White House") and looked at it and considered it a good poll. After looking at it today, after what happened to me down there, I stopped and said maybe these girls....And not only that, when you have four or five coming out at the same time and they stick a microphone up in front of your face and say, "Would you vote for a woman if she was running for President?" and you have three of your best lady friends standing right there and you say "No"?-------George

This led to speculation on the part of the other group members that all of the interviewers were probably female and that the gender of the interviewer must have had an influence on the male respondents. They agreed that males responding to the question about support for a female candidate for the White House might feel pressured to answer in the affirmative, regardless of their real position, so as
not to offend the interviewer. These participants touched upon a methodological problem of opinion measurement that is acknowledged in the literature but all too often ignored in practice.

OPINION FLUIDITY

The volatility of opinion was another issue that was considered when discussing the measurement of the public's opinion. One participant reminded the others that the results reflect the public's opinion at one point in time. "People's opinions, even my own, can change overnight with more information on a certain subject." Historical events, personal experiences, and a variety of other factors have the potentiality of reshaping or maybe intensifying previously held opinions. Public opinion, as pointed out by the participant, is dynamic, not static and poll results should be interpreted with this in mind. Again, this warning illustrates a relatively sophisticated understanding of the problems and subtleties of polling, an understanding which, however, only a few possessed.

PUBLIC ISSUES

When asked to evaluate some of the consumer type polls, one participant offered her rather rigid criterion for deciding whether or not an item was, in fact, a public opinion poll. She declared that public opinion polls must address public
issues and not consumer preferences. So, according to her standards the "Women in the White House" poll was a public opinion poll but the "Columbus Best Sellers List" was not.

As she saw it:

I always thought a of a public opinion poll in a very strict, strict sense that you're looking for some sort of information and you're going to process it on some public issues. Consumer information, I don't think is a public opinion poll. -------Leslie

Most researchers and practitioners probably would agree with her assessment, although a healthy debate would ensue concerning what is and what is not a public issue.

On the flip side, consensus among the participants was that public opinion is, anything to do with the public. Here, a strict, literal interpretation of the word public is invoked. If a survey is conducted, on any topic, and members of the public are interviewed then, by definition, it is a public opinion poll. Results from consumer polls, market research surveys, and social and political polls are all perceived alike--measurements of the public's opinion/preferences.

I don't think that this is representative of how the nation feels, or anything like that. But, I think that... when I think "public", I think well, we're all part of some public and these are people who are part of the public and they were asked some questions and these are their responses....------Dawn

However, some participants offered qualifying statements, similar to the one cited above, stating that the item was a
public opinion poll but they were uncertain about the validity of the said poll.

INTENDED PURPOSE OF POLL

Some participants persisted in asking what the intended purpose of the poll was. This appeared to be one of their major criteria in the evaluation of whether or not the item under consideration was a public opinion poll. Occasionally, they qualified their assessment of the poll by stating that if the results are to be used for "such and such" purposes they would then have to decide against it being classified as a valid public opinion poll:

It ("Voices From Across America") is an opinion poll of the public. It ultimately depends on how you define it, if you're going to base projections on it. It is not a valid public opinion poll, but it is an opinion poll.-------Sally

Rather than focusing on the intended utilization of the poll results a few, addressing the initial rationale for the gathering of opinions, offered somewhat of a tautological explanation as to why they considered the poll under review to be a public opinion poll:

I think I would (consider the Congressional poll to be a public opinion poll) because after all, that's why they are sending it out, to get public opinion.-------Eunice

The Nielsen ratings were perceived quite differently as noted in the discussion about poll sponsorship. With the ratings, a few of the professional participants understood
the ratings and advertising connection, and the financial implication of that relationship. Although, they questioned Nielsen's methodology their understanding of the intended purpose of the ratings was the overriding consideration in their evaluations: Arguing that there was too much money at stake for it not to be a reliable measure of the public's prime time television programming preferences:

The network executives think so, that this is one (a public opinion poll).------Scott

To say it's a poll, there are billions and billions of dollars allocated to the results here. It's a very small sample but obviously it must have credibility to advertising. They want to know how many people are watching and whether they are going to pay $60,000 or $100,000.------Robert

If it's a scientific sampling of the mass of America? No. From a marketing point of view this is considered to be extremely important. The advertising rating shares are crucial.------Dana

This intriguing concept of intended use will be addressed in the following chapter which deals with poll credibility.

OPINION VERSUS BEHAVIOR

Discussions about the "Columbus Best Sellers List" addressed a topic of great interest and concern to opinion researchers: The inferring of behavioral outcomes from the measurement of opinions. A few participants argued that
the Best Sellers List was the most accurate public opinion poll possible because it measured actual behavior. As the old saying goes, "People put their money where their mouth is." Whereas, they argued, with opinion polls one could never be certain that people will act according to what they have opined:

In some respects I think I put more credence in what people do than what they say. This is almost analogous to the vote. This is not what they think is a good idea, but this is what they put their money behind.--------Dick

That would definitely be what people are reading the most. Those who are reading are reading these the most. So, I would think that this would be probably the most accurate poll of any of these we have looked at.--------Barb

Some viewed the Nielsen ratings in a similar fashion:

It's just like the booklist, this is what people watch. I don't know if they have their computers tapped into what but it is how many people are watching these shows.--------Christine

But, as will be discussed in the following chapter, many participants were not sold on the 'purity' of this measure of public opinion, pointing to some real life experience which deflated the credibility of the "Best Sellers List".

Summarizing this brief overview, suffice it to say that few participants would be considered knowledgeable enough to conduct a sophisticated analysis of the seven poll items presented. As previously pointed out, those able to dis-
cuss the intricacies of sample selection, sample size, question wording, and the like were those who were for the most part familiar with opinion research techniques and principles from either their work or college training. Yet, those who were not schooled in the techniques of polling touched upon some of the more intriguing and insightful elements of opinion measurement. From their "naive" perspective and in lay language they identified rather esoteric and theoretical concerns of interest to many public opinion researchers and scholars.

POLL RATINGS AND POLL FAMILIARITY

One item on the post-discussion group questionnaire asked the respondent to indicate his or her perceptions of the overall quality of various national and local polling organizations. The instructions specified that one was to rate only those organizations that one was familiar with. Not only were there three quality rating categories (Highest quality; Reasonably Good quality; Lowest quality) but a Not Familiar response also was available. Reported below will be 1) frequencies for each of the fifteen poll; 2) aggregate correctness scores with male and female breakdowns; 3) aggregate familiarity scores with male and female breakdowns.
For the correctness score each poll was judged a priori to be of either high or reasonably good quality or of the lowest quality. Each participant was graded as to whether or not they were correct in their evaluation of each of the fifteen items. This liberal method of scoring benefitted the respondent because of the collapsing of the Highest quality and Reasonably Good quality categories. In some cases it was quite obvious that the poll under question was of the highest quality, yet if the respondent rated it as Reasonably Good that was considered to be a correct answer. For each correct evaluation the respondent received a score of "1". For an incorrect evaluation, the respondent was assigned an "0". The respondent was not penalized for not being familiar with any of the polls. The points totaled were divided by the total number of polls evaluated.

A familiarity score was calculated for each participant. This score represents the total number of polls the respondent indicated familiarity with, assuming that if one evaluated a poll one was familiar with it, especially since a Not Familiar response category was available with no stigma attached. This score adds some power to the interpretation of the correctness score. For example, a respondent might have received a perfect correctness score of 1.0 by correctly evaluating only two polls and not being familiar with the remaining thirteen. In the matrix reported in the
methodology chapter, the familiarity scores are reported, in parenthesis, along with the correctness score.

In looking at the Poll Ratings (Table 1), it is interesting to note that the three polls which are perceived to be of the highest quality (Gallup and Harris polls and the Nielsen Ratings) are polls that are relatively well known. In fact, the names Gallup and Harris are synonymous with polling. From the discussion group remarks, it was quite evident that although some questioned Nielsen's methods, these television ratings were considered to be a public opinion poll. When asked to evaluate the Nielsen ratings many proclaimed it to be a public opinion poll because "It's the Nielsen ratings." This suggests that Nielsen's near monopolistic hold on the measurement of audience behavior and preferences has helped to make Nielsen a household word and that Nielsen has been successful in working its way into the collective conscience. Although the Nielsen ratings were one of the three most highly rated polls it must be noted that two-thirds of the participants believed that the ratings were, at best, reasonably good while almost one-third rated it as being of the lowest quality.
Table 1

POLL RATINGS - FREQUENCIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLL</th>
<th>HIGHEST QUALITY</th>
<th>REAS. GOOD QUALITY</th>
<th>LOWEST QUALITY</th>
<th>NOT FAMILIAR</th>
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<td>GALLUP</td>
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<td>(28) 51.9%</td>
<td>00) 0%</td>
<td>(03) 5.6%</td>
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<td>(18) 34.0</td>
<td>(17) 32.1</td>
<td>(02) 3.8</td>
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<td>14) 28.0</td>
<td>(22) 44.0</td>
<td>03) 6.0</td>
<td>(11) 22.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(27) 52.9</td>
<td>03) 5.9</td>
<td>(08) 15.7</td>
</tr>
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<td>(23) 46.9</td>
<td>(04) 8.2</td>
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<td>(28) 56.0</td>
<td>03) 6.0</td>
<td>(08) 16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(31) 59.6</td>
<td>(02) 3.8</td>
<td>(08) 15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(10) 21.3</td>
<td>(01) 2.1</td>
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<td>(28) 54.9</td>
<td>04) 7.8</td>
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<td>(17) 32.7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The mean scores for the Nielsen ratings (Table 2) reflect these ambivalent perceptions, for Nielsen dropped from the second position when ranked on the basis of Highest quality responses to the ninth position when ranked by mean scores. Again, the more reputable polling organizations have retained their respectable positions, still ranking in the top half. Considering the salience of television in modern society and the on-going debates about the quality of TV programming, it might be the case that some were venting their dissatisfaction with network programming decisions.

As far as the ability to correctly evaluate each of the fifteen poll items, the participants as a group, had a mean score of .758 (Table 3). Over three-quarters of the responses were correct in their evaluation of the poll items - a solid performance. There was approximately a ten percentage point difference between the male and female participants, with males more likely to correctly appraise the poll items. Males received a mean score of .808, whereas females scored a .719. Male participants also scored high on the familiarity measure, identifying almost twelve (11.80) of the fifteen poll items while females were familiar with about ten (10.17) of the polls. The mean score for the group was 11.24 (Table 3).
Table 2

POLL RATINGS - MEAN SCORES

Scores range in value from 1.0 (Highest quality to 3.0 (Lowest quality). Scores were calculated excluding the Not Familiar category and Missing Data. The group mean score = 2.10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLL</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GALLUP</td>
<td>(51)</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROPER</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HARRIS</td>
<td>(39)</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NY TIMES</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC NEWS</td>
<td>(44)</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON POST</td>
<td>(37)</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS NEWS</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC NEWS</td>
<td>(41)</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIELSEN</td>
<td>(51)</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARBITRON</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLS. C-J</td>
<td>(46)</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLS. DISPATCH</td>
<td>(48)</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCAL POLITICAL POLLS</td>
<td>(47)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCAL CALL-IN POLLS</td>
<td>(50)</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAN-IN-THE-STREET</td>
<td>(52)</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
CORRECTNESS AND FAMILIARITY SCORES

CORRECTNESS SCORES
MEAN = .758
MEAN (MALES) = .808
MEAN (FEMALES) = .719
Scores ranged from 0 - 1.0., where 1.0 represents a perfect score. Calculations exclude Not Familiar and Missing Data.

FAMILIARITY SCORES *
MEAN = 11.24
MEAN (MALES) = 11.80
MEAN (FEMALES) = 10.17
* Scores represent number of poll items the respondent indicated familiarity with. There were fifteen polls listed in the post-discussion questionnaire.

Caution should be the guideword in the interpretation of these data. As described in Chapter 2, these measures were included in the post-discussion group questionnaire. Without a doubt, these measures were contaminated by the preceding ninety minute discussions. Secondly, the male-female comparisons are somewhat misleading for, as previously explained, it is more of an indication of educa-
tional and/or professional differences than it is of gender-based differences. These results are presented as ancillary information and the data should be interpreted with a 'handful' of salt.

CONCLUSION
In an attempt to better understand what people understand about public opinion polls and polling - from the techniques of polling to the interpretation of poll results - sixty individuals participated in small group discussions. Through their evaluations of seven poll items a picture emerged which identified the numerous criteria and evaluative strategies used for defining and understanding what public opinion polls are about. As described in this chapter, evaluative approaches varied. Some, calling upon their technical expertise offered critiques that would delight public opinion researchers and practitioners alike. Most often these participants scrutinized the poll items, questioning the sampling procedures, size of sample, question wording, and poll sponsor. These individuals were described as poll sophisticates, for most of them exhibited an above average understanding of the principles and mechanics of public opinion polling. However, as the data suggest, the less technically sophisticated participants quite often touched upon some of the more theoretical and
problematic issues of concern to public opinion scholars. These individuals also made reference to some of the methodological issues addressed by the more sophisticated, but as was evident from some of their comments and questions they were less clear, and in some cases sufficiently confused about the technicalities of polling. Lacking the technical expertise, it seemed that they were better able to deal with the stimuli by evoking personalized schemas or scripts, thereby employing evaluative criteria based on personal experiences and their common sense. Presentation style, opinion fluidity, distinctions between public and consumer issues, intended purpose of the poll, and the important distinction between measurement of opinion and the inference of behavior were issues that were, more often than not, initially raised by the less technically-oriented participants.

As far as the two previously mentioned assumptions that have guided (or misguided) public opinion researchers in recent years, the data do suggest that we need to rethink our positions. First, I questioned how realistic is it to assume that the public interprets, appraises, and utilizes polls and poll results in the same manner as do the more sophisticated researchers and practitioners? Secondly, researchers have focused almost entirely on valid, scientific polls in studies questioning the effect of poll
results on individuals behavior, opinions, and/or preferences. Ignoring other types of public opinion polls (the non-scientific, non-political) suggests that those poll types are of little consequence, exerting no influence on the public. What did this study find?

As far as the first assumption is concerned, only a small subset of the participants possessed the knowledge and expertise to critically evaluate public opinion polls. Considering the educational/professional bias of the participants, one can assume that the general population would not be as sophisticated in their understanding of public opinion polling and the interpretation of poll data. In fact, there is reason to believe that outside of the laboratory-like setting, even those identified as being somewhat sophisticated in their understanding of polls might not evaluate public opinion polls as critically and thoroughly as they did in the experimental environment. Nisbett and Ross (1980) in their defense of laboratory experiments in the field of cognitive psychology argue that the laboratory setting may overestimate the skills and abilities of the subject while underestimating the subject's deficiencies. In these experimental situations the participants are not only aware that they are being "tested" and are on their best intellectual behavior, but they are receiving information that is already pre-packaged for
them. They are guided and prodded by the researcher. In everyday life it is rather doubtful that the more sophisticated participants scrutinize public opinion polls as rigorously as they did in the group setting. As will be discussed in the next chapter, it was surprising to find that questions concerning poll methods take a back seat (even for some of the more technically sophisticated participants) when talking about potential influence and utilization of the poll results.

This leads to the second assumption. If most individuals are fairly oblivious to the principles of the scientific method of public opinion measurement, then is it not unrealistic to expect them to dismiss unscientific polls as being unworthy of their attention. One cannot critically disavow something on the basis of principles one doesn't recognize or understand. Furthermore, as it will become quite apparent in the discussions having to do with poll credibility and use of poll information, other, possibly more meaningful criteria are applied when evaluating polls, with more subjective and psychological factors overriding the objective, technically-oriented criteria.
Chapter IV
PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY AND UTILIZATION OF POLL RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter reported on what people know and understand about polling techniques and public opinion polls in general. This section will address two other important aspects of the relationship between the individual and public opinion polls. First, the question of poll credibility will be discussed. An attempt will be made to identify the conditions under which poll results are viewed as being credible, and alternatively those conditions precipitating a negative evaluation of the poll results. This question of poll credibility is clearly related to the previous chapter. In fact, many of the poll characteristics which were cited in support of an item being deemed a public opinion poll were similarly offered when evaluating the poll's credibility. Hence, some overlap will be evident.

As argued in the previous chapter, there are a number of underlying assumptions that have guided public opinion researchers, assumptions that need reexamination. It is
believed that if a poll is not perceived as being credible, people would not believe its results: that is, the individual would disregard such poll information, precluding any possibility of poll effects or influence. This apparently is not the case. A most interesting finding having to do with poll credibility was that credibility of the poll was often not a major concern. As will be discussed, certain psychological factors and a pragmatic calculus of the consequential outcomes of basing one’s decisions and/or actions on the poll information sometimes makes the question of credibility a secondary, if not moot issue.

In addition to the question of credibility, the issues of poll use and influence will be addressed. Participants' comments regarding the use of polls very much echo the findings of studies focusing on media usage: Individuals attend to different poll types for different reasons, reasons growing out of a particular set of social and psychological needs. It seems appropriate then, that the discussion of poll use be grounded in the body of literature on media uses and gratifications.

Participants were also asked to speculate on how the information reported in each of the respective polls might influence their own and others' opinions or behavior. In their conversations, conditions and circumstances were described under which poll results might exert some influ-
ence on the individual. In conjunction with the reported findings on perceived credibility of the various polls, an interesting picture emerged. Under certain conditions poll results are influential even though the individual might question the poll's credibility.

Another issue, very much related to poll credibility and influence, surfaced during the group discussions. A number of participants compared reported poll results with journalistic reviews, critiques, and editorials. They made some interesting comparisons between the opinions of the public and the opinions of perceived experts and opinion leaders. Questions of source preference, that is, the preference or reliance upon one source of information over another, speaks to the time-honored model of the two-step flow of communication and persuasion. How does that model fare when alternative information is readily available -- information that suggests how others, presumably similar to themselves, feel?

In addition to the reporting of the group discussion data, results of the relevant post-discussion group survey items will be presented.
PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY OF POLLS

In order to get a very general sense of the participants' perceptions of poll credibility, the results of a question included in the post-discussion group survey will be presented (Table 4). The question asked, "In general, when you read or hear about a public opinion poll how much confidence do you have in the results reported?" The responses were virtually split, with 46.6% responding that they had a fair amount of confidence compared with 43.1% answering that they had only a little confidence in the results reported. Only 1.7% of the participants indicated a lot of confidence in reported poll results, whereas 5.2% had no confidence in such information. Again, it should be noted that the question was included in the post-discussion questionnaire and the possibility of contamination by the earlier discussion clearly exists. However, if anything, one might have expected fewer affirmative responses considering that the previous 90 minutes were spent critically evaluating polls. Yet, nearly half (27 of 56) responded positively.
Six dominant themes related to poll credibility emerged during the group discussions. It appears that for some, the congruence of the reported poll findings with their own related, personal experiences was enough evidence that the poll was credible. Conversely, if the poll results contradicted one's personal experience or perceptions, then the poll was more likely to be skeptically reviewed. Some individuals simply held negative predispositions towards the activity of public opinion polling and hence put very little credence in any reported poll results. This negative attitude overrode all other factors. Many evaluated the respective poll's credibility by employing methodological criteria. The evaluative criteria called forth basi-
cally coincided with the objective standards applied when considering whether or not an item was in fact a public opinion poll. The issue of intended purpose was raised again in determinations of poll credibility. A few indicated that since much was at stake vis-a-vis the poll results, that was convincing enough evidence that the information was valid.

Participation was another factor considered when evaluating the credibility of public opinion polls. A number of participants commented upon the fact that they had never been selected (either by telephone or in-person) to participate in a public opinion poll. Apparently, this had some impact on their perceptions of the activity of polling, their non-involvement contributing to their skepticism. Interestingly, a couple of participants did relate stories describing their participation in some surveys, indicating that their experiences had a negative impact on their perceptions of polling and the measurement of public opinion. Lastly, and probably most fascinating, is the finding that credibility is not always an expected and/or an important factor in the evaluation, use, and influence of public opinion polls. Conditions were presented under which the poll results would possibly exert some influence upon the individual's decision and/or behavior even though the individual knew the poll was not valid and the results were questionable.
CONGRUENCE WITH EXISTING BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES

Whether or not the polls results were consonant with one's experiences or beliefs was a major determinant of the poll's credibility. This was the case across almost all poll types. If the poll agreed with the individual's previously held opinion or beliefs about the particular topic then it was likely that the poll would be considered credible and the results valid. As one participant stated: "I tend to believe polls that agree with me." Poll type, that is whether the poll was scientific or not, was not of primary concern. Even for one of the most blatantly non-scientific polls, the "Voices from Across the USA" man-in-the-street interview, some commented that people would probably find these responses credible, especially if the opinions reported agreed with the reader's beliefs. As this discussion illustrates:

If they (the public) read this, would they believe this is representative of public opinion?--------Group leader

If they happen to agree with that particular person who is in their age group...and you have some pretty good cross section here 21 years to 47.--------Parker

This credibility - congruence relationship was quite evident in the discussion involving the "Best of Columbus" survey. There was a fair chance that most participants would have had some experience with at least one of the
categories discussed. Many critically evaluated the poll results by comparing it with their own experiences, some deeming the specific "Best" category credible because it was congruent with their personal evaluations. Also, congruence in one category lent some credibility to the findings for the categories with which the participant had had no previous experiences.

I remember spending a lot of time at the late Scioto Trails (voted "best" bar in Columbus) and I couldn't agree more....Yes, this might influence me to try something out, maybe go to Friday's (voted "best" brunch in Columbus) for brunch one time to see if it's really as good...-------David

In evaluating the "Woman in the White House" poll some admitted that if poll findings agreed with their opinions then they probably would not critically evaluate the poll. However, if the results were in disagreement with their personal views and/or perceptions of the public's opinion on that specific issue, then they would be more critical of the poll, presumably hoping to find some reason to invalidate the reported results.

I tend to surround myself with people who are open-minded. I know that they would vote for a woman. I would like to think that 64% would. I don't see that as being totally off base because of my experiences.-------Kathy

What if the figures were the other way around with 35% wanting a woman and 65% not? Would you then think it was an accurate poll?-------Group leader
I would doubt it more and I think I would tend to question the poll more. Of course when the results are more of what I'd like to see I'm not going to ask so many questions about it.... I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. If it's something I like, I'm not going to question it.------Kathy

Poll credibility was questioned when the reported results contradicted a person's own experiences or when the results seemed counter-intuitive. However, as illustrated by the comment below, not always were the criticisms or inferences logical. One participant blamed the Nielsen ratings for cancelling a television program that had won an Emmy for one of its stars. Apparently, this individual had a difficult time differentiating between an award presented for professional achievement, and program popularity as measured by the Nielsens. Because of this perceived inconsistency between the Nielsen ratings and professional awards, the ratings were negatively viewed, holding no credibility for this particular participant.

In evaluating the "Woman in the White House" poll one group member questioned the accuracy of the poll results because she was quite surprised by the positive response:

I don't believe it myself that at this particular time that many people would vote that way. Is this really a factual thing?------Mary2

Participants described another set of conditions under which poll findings might assume a fair amount of credibil-
ity. If the individual has not already formed an opinion about the particular issue, nor has any sense of the public's opinion regarding said issue, then it is very possible that the reported poll results would carry more weight. It is less likely that the findings would be purposely scrutinized, as in the case of poll results that contradict one's personal stance or perceptions of the public's position. An important perceptual base is lacking: there exists no cognitive support for one's intuitive reactions therefore one would likely concede to the superiority of the published poll results.

I think the one on how we rate lawyers, it is based on people who have had actual experience with it. I look at this (Lawyers' poll) and on some of these things I disagree, but I don't have any firsthand knowledge. I've never had any first hand (experience) dealing with attorneys that would affect how I feel.-------Olivera

BASIC MISTRUST OF POLLS

A few participants were unabashedly critical of most of the polls reviewed, regardless of the poll type or poll topic. Two of the most critical group members were elderly women who mentioned the polling fiasco of the 1948 presidential race. From their comments, it appeared that that early experience with polling had a long-lasting effect, leaving them with a highly negative impression of modern polling techniques. As one woman commented:

Remember the time they had put Dewey had won? They had big headlines. But he lost. So, you can't go on those things.-------Bea
Another female participant also appeared to be negatively predisposed towards polls in general. Although she was too young to recall the 1948 debacle, she offered other reasons why she didn’t pay much attention to polls. For the most part, her mistrust of polls was related to the survey instrument: the closed-ended questionnaire. This particular individual indicated that she expected poll information to be informative. Cognitively, she had surpassed the dualist stage and possessed a rather sophisticated view of the world. Because she saw the world as being extremely complex, acknowledging the existence of many opinions and qualifications, the dichotomous nature of public opinion measurement was quite irritating. When asked whether she, as an individual, would pay attention to polls come across in her daily media foray, she remarked:

I guess I don't too much....None of them inform me because I noticed that I filled out right here (referring to pre-discussion questionnaire) strongly disagree or agree....There could be another answer like 'maybe' or something...it doesn't leave room for that. I'm sure it's not telling my complete view. That's what they don't do. You either agree, disagree, or unsure. I may not agree or disagree and I'm not unsure either.-------Cynthia

Her comments are interesting in that they point to the possibility that one's disapproval of a particular measurement strategy might lead one to condemn public opinion in its entirety: The credibility of all polls suffers because of this negative appraisal.
This critical assessment of the closed-ended questionnaire is closely related to some of the other comments concerning poll credibility. This next section will report on some of the methodological problems discussed and how the participants perceived the relationship between methodology and credibility. The following discussion differs from the above in that those questioning poll methodology were not indicting all public opinion polls, just the specific ones under review.

METHODOLOGY AND CREDIBILITY

It is not surprising to find that, for many, methodology was of prime concern when evaluating poll credibility. Many of the issues raised were similar to the methodological concerns outlined in the previous chapter. Poll sponsorship, question-wording, frame of reference, demographics, presentation style, and poll representativeness were all alluded to. Rather than reiterating the findings of the previous chapter I will discuss those issues that offer a slightly new perspective.

Failure to provide an explanation of the survey methodology left many questions unanswered. In evaluating the poll items many commented on the lack of demographic information such as the population composition. Not having this information made it difficult for many to critically evaluate the items as being credible, bona fide public opinion
polls. Some took the liberty of making certain assumptions about the methodology (including the sample population), this allowing for their subsequent pronouncements on the validity of the poll. Others were not so inclined, complaining that the absence of such essential information make evaluations impossible. For these participants, methodological information was inextricably related to poll credibility. As this conversation among some participants indicated:

The discussion here is centering on...we're talking about sample size but we're also talking about the lack of any information...information documenting the data pool.--------Michael

We're filling it in.--------Unidentified panelist

Right. It would be helpful for a lot of people to see that information reported with the poll.--------Michael

What other information would you like to see reported?--------Group leader

How many males, females? Time of year.--------John

I bet you would see a difference.--------Doug

Regardless of whether you would or not, I think it would be helpful to evaluate the results of polls...to know something about the people who were polled. It would give more weight to the information.--------Michael
It appears the inclusion of methodological information would give the impression that the poll results were credible, or at least relatively more credible than the others that lacked such information. This has important implications. If we're dealing with a public that is quite naive when it comes their understanding of proper polling techniques, then "impressions" can carry a lot of weight, and in fact, be the only determinant of poll credibility:

Just the fact that they took the time to say "random sample" and they gave you the margin of error and all that...I would probably put more stock in the Lawyer one (poll). I don't know if it's right or wrong to do that. But it looks like there's a little more care taken. And they're giving you this information.-------Kathy

The above comment was referring to the "How we rate lawyers" poll. The participant lent more credibility to that poll because of the accompanying paragraph describing the poll methodology. The descriptive paragraph was printed adjacent to the polls results with its own subheading "About the Poll." This separation of the methodology from the results elicited an unexpected reaction from one participant. In her description of two distinctly different ways of reading the newspaper -- skimming versus attentive reading - were two distinctly different ways of interpreting the polls. The examples she provided described how she would read and ingest the "Woman in the White House" poll and the "Lawyers" poll:
Clearly, I would accept this (Lawyers poll) with more credulence than I would this (Woman in the White House) because for the simple matter of that "About the Poll." (But) when you're skimming, I'd give more credulence to this (Woman in the White House)....Basically, when you look at it, the format...this (referring to the accompanying paragraph describing poll methods) would be separate from the poll. I would give more credulence to this (Woman in the White House) because all the information is here.-------Chris.

Interestingly enough, for this individual, and probably for others 'just skimming' the newspaper the presentation of the methodological information became a factor in the interpretation of the poll's credibility.

Poll sponsorship was another factor associated with poll credibility. This is not surprising, for poll sponsorship was a major factor in considerations of what actually constituted a public opinion poll. This issue reemerged when discussing poll credibility. Repeatedly, Gallup, Nielsen, and other nationally recognized polling organizations were used as benchmarks in the evaluations of the poll items. As reported previously, the reputations of these organizations and the cues they provide to the poll consumer should not be underestimated. It appears that indication of such sponsorship allows the reader to infer that the poll is reliable and credible. For some, organizational reputation precluded critical evaluations. One participant stated:

I think there is a presumed methodology (of the) pollsters. It's a matter of faith and we just accept that their methodology is scientific.-------Steve
Another, believing that reported source was an indication of proper polling techniques stated that:

If it's credible they'll put their name on it because they put a lot of work into it.--------Devonna

This suggests that if the reported poll and its results include the name of the responsible polling organization that the public infers credibility, regardless of the methods employed.

Two participants mentioned poll sponsorship but in an entirely different vein. Whether or not the pollster was an interested party, or represented an interested party, was an important factor in their interpretation of the poll findings:

It's hard to believe a lot of those (polls) because you don't know whether they are product backed, which would be just the same as with political polls. You don't know who's backing them and what their political issues are....--------Devonna

Whether they're an interested party or not. If I'm going to read a poll about prayer in school and it's done by an Evangelical group I would think twice before I took it seriously.--------Leslie

SURVEY QUESTIONS AND POLL CREDIBILITY

For some, the format of the questions influenced their perceptions of the poll's credibility. As previously reported, one participant stated that she disliked all polls because closed-ended questions did not "tell the whole sto-
ry." She viewed the man-in-the-street interview as being preferable to the other polls. She was not alone on this count. In evaluating the "Lawyers" poll a number of participants voiced concern about the validity of the poll results. Did those individuals polled have actual experience with members of the legal profession, or were their responses merely "impressions" of how lawyers behaved? Some of the female participants compared the "Lawyers" poll to the "Woman in the White House" poll believing that the results of the latter, in some respects, were more credible. They argued that anyone could answer the "Woman in the White House" poll; answers were not dependent upon any type of experience with the subject matter. However, with the "Lawyers" poll, meaningful responses seemed dependent upon actual experience with lawyers. Since questionnaire response categories were closed-ended, some group members questioned whether the respondents did in fact have an experiential/information base from which they responded, or if they just found it easy to reply to the already provided response categories:

I think the "Woman in the White House" is more accurate because everybody can answer that question. Everybody has a feeling about that no matter what their past experience was. This (Lawyers poll)...I could never answer these questions. No matter how impressive this (Lawyers poll) looks to me, it's the questions.--------Dawn

I think the "Woman in the White House." I would put more credence in that because you're asked a
question that anyone can answer...you can say 'yes' or 'no'. But when you ask a question about how you rate lawyers, that's just something that....People may not have any real actual experience dealing with lawyers....--------M2

As illustrated by these comments, some group members pointed to problems inherent in the closed-ended questionnaire format. Frame of reference and information base were two important concerns when discussing poll credibility. The open-ended format was preferred for reasons that it provided a more in-depth answer to the question posed and gave the reader further insight into the way the respondent had interpreted the question and the rationale for his or her response. However, one participant who was very mistrustful of opinion polls, having been 'fooled' by the 1948 presidential predictions, took a different approach to the open-ended survey. In evaluating the "Voices from Across the USA" she stated, quite adamantly, that:

A lot of these people are asked these questions but they don't know anything about it and they make up these answers. You can tell in the answers that they don't know too much about it.--------Bea

For this individual, the open-ended responses provided her with an opportunity to critically evaluate each of the respondents' replies. Their relatively detailed answers afforded this participant an opportunity to judge the logic and/or reasoning behind their opinions.
PARTICIPATION AND POLL CREDIBILITY

The question of past participation in a polling activity was raised in almost every discussion group. Many commented that they had never participated in a survey. This lack of personal involvement seemed to give rise to negative or skeptical appraisals of polling. Conversations about polls being representative of the general population did not sit well with those who were never asked to participate. The overwhelming sentiment was that with all the polls being conducted one would have expected to have been contacted, at least once. As one group member stated his reasons for not believing in the results of political polls:

I'm 33 years old. I've been a registered voter for I don't know how many years. I've never received a random survey yet...a phone call yet.-----Tom2

For some, it wasn't only that they had not ever been asked to participate in a public opinion poll, but neither had any members of their close social circle. One participant fairly critical of the Nielsen ratings based her negative evaluations on the fact that she, "never knew a Nielsen family." This tended to fuel their skepticism regarding the purported representativeness of most scientific polls.

Yet, for those who had previously participated in a poll of one sort or another, the old proverb, "familiarity breeds contempt", seemed to hold true. Their experiences
had not been positive ones. Some reported deliberately lying to the interviewer for reasons of social desirability or because they became bored with the interview. One group member was quite disenchanted with polls in general having lived in a large city where telemarketing and political "hucksterism" was practiced under the guise of opinion measurement. As he described it, organizations would make telephone contact with city residents under the pretext of opinion polling. During the course of this exchange respondents would be asked to 'help the cause' by making a financial contribution. For these individuals their only experiences with public opinion polling had been questionable, at best, leaving them with a cynical attitude towards polls.

CREDIBILITY NOT AN ISSUE

A most surprising finding was that under certain conditions poll credibility was not an issue. It did not particularly matter whether or not the poll was valid. The poll was attended to for certain reasons and the question of credibility was of no importance. In some instances, participants reported that they knew that the poll results were questionable or outright invalid but that did not discourage them from reading or listening to the results. Some polls are read for fun and entertainment while others are used to provide information for important decisions.
Credibility, as a precondition for poll use and influence, was found to be dependent upon the individual's expected utilization of the poll information. Participants' comments about poll credibility brought to light the important fact that not all polls are utilized in the same fashion. Not only does use differ by poll type, but more importantly, the functions any specific poll serves varies according to the individual's needs. One poll might provide important information to one individual while for another individual it might serve as a form of entertainment. These findings coincide with the research conducted on mass media audiences and their use of the various media. The following discussion will address the individual's utilization of reported public opinion polls applying the "uses and gratifications" framework provided by communication scholars.

USES OF POLLS

The uses and gratifications approach to the study of the individual and the mass media attempts to identify a variety of functions that the media serve for the individual. It is an approach that studies "the gratifications which attract and hold audiences to the kinds of media and types of content which satisfy their social and psychological needs" (Katz, Gurevitch, and Hass, 1973). Uses and gratifications essentially provides a functional analysis of the
media, following in the paths of Wright (1959), Lasswell (1948), and Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948). As described by Katz, et al.:

This approach to mass communication is essentially functional. It argues that people bend the media to their needs more readily than the media overpower them; that the media are at least as much agents of diversion and entertainment as of information and influence. It argues, moreover, that the selection of media and content, and the uses to which they are put, are considerably influenced by social role and psychological predispositions (pp., 164-165).

Lasswell, and Lazarsfeld and Merton, adherents of the functional model, have delineated some societal functions of communication. As Lasswell saw it, the mass media served three essential functions in society. The media survey the environment, they correlate the response of the society to the environment (development of public opinion), and they are transmitters of societal values, culture, and norms. Lazarsfeld and Merton identified three additional societal functions of the media; status conferral, enforcement of social norms, and narcotization (Becker, 1983).

The uses and gratifications approach differs from the above descriptions, in that its unit of analysis is the individual. It attempts to identify the functions that the mass media serve for the individual, rather than for the society. Some of the functions or uses of the media which have been identified are: as surveillance or information-seeking; for developing a concept of self; as a profession-
al tool; for facilitating social interaction; as a substitution for social interaction; by providing relaxation and escapism; and for routinization of daily life (Becker, 1983).

In the group discussions, frequent references were made to how an individual would use a poll and its published results. Polls seem to serve many of the same functions as do the mass media. There exist many similarities between those uses identified by mass communication scholars employing the uses and gratifications approach and the participants' comments. Most of the seven aforementioned uses were addressed in the group discussions. As will become clear from the findings reported in the following section, use of poll information is quite individualized: A poll that might serve the function of relaxation for one respondent serves the function of surveillance for another. The findings will be reported by comparing polls and responses elicited for each poll item. This way the individualized nature of poll information utilization will be most apparent. What communication scholars have learned from their studies of media use seems to hold true for use of poll information, and polls in general: The individual might not always use the poll information provided, in ways intended by those who conducted or publicized the poll.
VOICES FROM ACROSS THE USA

Reactions to this poll clearly illustrated how the same stimuli can serve varied needs. Some participants indicated that they read this type of poll because it provides them with some sense of how others in society think about certain issues of the day:

I'll look at it not as a poll and what does one say versus a poll...not to arrive at any greater clarity on an issue (but) just to see what people are thinking.-------Robert

For some it exposed them to the opinions of the "common man". They alluded to a need for the opinions of people similar to themselves. Expert opinions were quite prevalent in the media and what they found in man-in-the-street interviews were respondents and responses that were straightforward, simply worded, and compact:

These individual opinions, ...now, I enjoy this thing. These are ordinary people like you and me and I enjoy reading their opinions.-------Cynthia

Sure, I'd read it. You know, you get tired of hearing all the opinions of these so-called experts and it is nice to see what somebody is saying who is your next door neighbor.-------Kathy

Right. Something you can understand.-------Dawn

I usually look at what the person does too. I do look at the occupation but I look at how intelligent it is, what they're saying. You can have a very intelligent, informed barber. I look at what they say and how it's put and things like that.-------Kathy
One participant, unsolicited, mentioned that she occasionally reads the "Voices from Across the USA" column in USA Today because it presents the opinions of ordinary people rather than the preferences of the publisher:

I have a problem with Columbus newspapers because I know who owns the Dispatch and I know what his politics are and I know what kinds of readers....I read USA Today sometimes, not for what the editorials say but they have a little thing asking people across the country what they think, and I read that rather than people who own the paper....--------Leslie

Borrowing from the uses and gratifications terminology, the above responses suggest that for these individuals this particular poll served the function of surveillance, providing them with information about how others think.

Not only did the poll provide information regarding how others think, but it also served an educative function for some of the panelists. Contrary to the above comments which described the man-in-the-street interviewees as ordinary people, some group members viewed the interviewees as 'quasi-experts'. Compared to the group members' own knowledge base, these respondents were perceived as being more knowledgeable, their comments educating the reader. As they described it:

There are so many things that I'm not knowledgeable about. If there's someone who's...like here, the man who's Vice President of the financial institution in D.C.. I would read it to see what he says because I think that sometimes the job that you're in you're more knowledgeable about it. I know I'm sure not knowledgeable about this.--------Ginny
I think I would just listen to what they have to say and sometimes I think that they have some insight into things that I might not. Maybe they have given it more thought than I had prior to that and what they say really makes sense to me if I think about it.-------Barb

A couple of participants explained that they saw the purpose of polls to be poll specific: The purpose of the "Voices" poll being to stimulate the reader intellectually. As one participant described it:

I think that's the point that we have to think about when we look at polls. Generally, what's the point (purpose of the poll)? This (referring to the Congressional Representative's questionnaire) is to possibly educate the Congressional Representative on his or her more literate and perhaps persistent constituents. This ("Voices") is to stimulate us, to give us the sense that we are somewhere in this stand of 7 people.-------Jack.

As stated previously, one of the identified functions of the media is that it helps the individual to develop a concept of self. This function was also alluded to in discussions about the "Voices" poll. Participants mentioned that one might use the poll to reinforce their already held opinions. Polls, then, can provide additional external support for the individual's position, thereby reinforcing their beliefs and possibly strengthening their self concept. As described by group members:

I think they would just find whatever comment is most closely associated to theirs and think, "yes, somebody is saying that...I guess I'm kind of right."-------Simon

The way I see it, people have their own opinions and use this article to back it up.-------Toml
This particular poll also provided a form of entertainment for some of the participants. Since pictures of the respondents are printed along with their city of residence, age, and profession some mentioned the fun of reading to see "who is saying what":

My true (purpose) is to see if they fit my stereotype. Like if it's from Jolene, Missouri...this is what I think someone from Jolene, Mo. would think. And, it's a little game I play to see if they fit into my stereotype of people.-------Leslie.

HOW WE RATE LAWYERS POLL

The primary function that this poll served was to educate those participants who had limited or no prior experiences with the legal profession. As one participant explained her interest in the poll:

Someday I might have to have a lawyer so I'd like to see what they said about them.-------Eunice

WOMAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE POLL

Two functions were mentioned with regard to this poll. Some commented that the poll was interesting to read, with one participant stating that he almost always reads this section of USA Today because of the unexpected results:

I read USA Today everyday, and I look at these "USA Snapshots" because I think that they're interesting because they sort of bring up little things that are surprising. I was surprised also by the "Woman in the White House". It wouldn't shape my views or change my opinion or anything, but I do think that they're interesting.-------Stevel
Another participant stated that not only did he think the poll was entertaining but that he used the information in conversations with others. In this case, poll information might serve a utilitarian function, in that it provides material for expected social interactions:

It is fun to look at it and talk about it...but I don't think that it has any scientific validity.--------David

BEST OF COLUMBUS POLL

Most comments regarding the use of these poll results centered on the entertainment aspect of the information. Conceding that the poll methodology and results were questionable, most admitted that that was not an issue in their use of the poll. They enjoyed reading polls of this sort. As with the other polls, this particular poll, for some, served an entertainment function. The following comments illustrate such use:

When I saw this article I was really intrigued....These kinds of things intrigue me, but I realize it's not a scientific, systemized poll.--------Greg

It's an entertainment thing.--------Roger

Besides entertaining readers, some mentioned that the poll could provide information to those in need of guidance. Two scenarios were described in which such information would be sought or at least attended to. First, in cases where the individual is new in town, this type of
information was viewed as being most helpful. As was explained:

If I were new to town looking for pizza....it's valuable as long as you don't consider it gospel. It's another piece of information that you can process.-------John

If you want to try out new things, you might read this and check it out. We just moved here a couple of years ago and we read things like this and tried it out.-------Dawn

If I were an ice cream fan and they said the best ice cream were at a certain store and I was new to Columbus and I hadn't been to many ice cream places, maybe I'd try it.-------Dana

It's something that suggests if you haven't had it before you might go and see if it is the case, but not necessarily firmly believe it. That's the way I would view this. If I didn't know anything at all about something and I saw this, I would think maybe I would want to take my child to this playground, or whatever....-------Peter.

These comments suggest that for an individual unfamiliar with his or her environment, information provided in polls of this sort would probably be utilized. This especially appears to be the case in situations where there are a fair number of stimuli in the environment and the individual needs to narrow the field. This theme will be discussed further on in this chapter providing some rationale as to why some polls are influential while others might not be.

The other scenario alluded to is one in which an individual has an already developed interest and utilizes this information more discriminately. Having somewhat of an experiential base from which to judge the poll information,
the individual will pay attention to the relevant information, comparing what is presented with their own past experiences. The poll is still used as a guide or information source, but not as uncritically as in the former case.

Oh, yes definitely (pay attention to this poll). Like where you're going to buy your baked potato... Just looking at this, the "best" baked potato, I disagree with that so I'm not going to go to Wendy's and have a baked potato just because they say so.-------Barb

If it's somebody who really cares about it, they might be influenced. Unless you're into Natilus who really gives a damn? Or anything else on this thing. If I was interested in daycare, I would be influenced by this thing.-------Bob

From some of the comments offered, it also appears that some view this type of survey information as being quite reliable, possibly akin to "expert's" recommendations. It was felt that those who would respond to a mail poll of this sort would be those who are most interested in the categories being voted on, and interest is viewed as an indication of dedication and/or expertise. The following comments illustrate such utilization of this kind of poll data:

I'm into cooking and people who are into cooking are going to be the only one's answering this and if they say...it's their opinion and I'll check it out.-------Kathy

I think it's valuable. If you're attempting to find a different potato from what they have at Rax's then you might want to try Wendy's based on the fact that a few people who cared enough to send in their votes said it was good.-------John
NIELSEN RATINGS

As with many of the aforementioned polls, the Nielsen ratings also serve an entertainment function for some. A few participants mentioned that they believe people pay attention to the ratings basically out of curiosity:

People look at them because they have this fascination with who is number 1.-------Doug

One participant described a situation whereby the Nielsen ratings provided her with information that was needed for successful social interaction. She would pay attention to the published Nielsen ratings, using it as a guide for program selection:

If everyone at work is talking about it you don't want to sit there and be the only one....So you're going to watch it to see exactly what they're talking about.-------Gail

Another group member saw the utility of the ratings being such that it reinforced one's program preferences. As he explained it:

As a member of the public to look at this it may reinforce the fact that if I watched "Lace" and it got first place it might make me say, "well, heck, I watched the number one program that week."-------David

From the comments elicited, it is fair to say that the Nielsen ratings don't serve very many functions for the individual and that for the functions that were identified only a few participants use the ratings for those purposes.
COLUMBUS BEST SELLERS LIST

Unlike the Nielsen ratings, the Best Sellers list served more functions for more people. For many, the list served as a guide. It provided them with information about which books were selling the most, an indicator of popular taste. In a careful reading of the following comments, it became apparent that the list allowed the interested individual to get a sense of how others (book buyers) in their community were behaving, in as far as their reading activities. Some mentioned that they wanted to see if their current reading material had made the list. The list not only served a surveillance function, keeping the individual apprised of what was popular in their community, but it also enabled the individual to compare themselves with members of their community. Again, polls being used in the development of one's self concept. The Best Sellers list served an additional function in that it presented information about new releases.

If you read books because, which a lot of people do, they're popular and a lot of people seem to enjoy them, then I think it would have an affect on a lot of people. Like a hit movie or something.-------Kathy

Time magazine does it and I'm curious and I look...not too closely because I want to buy it, but because I want to see what's selling.-------Robert

I think it's interesting. I look at it, and then I pull out the New York Times and see where we are in Columbus. Are we kinda doing what people are doing nationally? Are we behind or with the times.-------David
If everyone's buying this book, there's surely something there that I'm missing.-------Ml

If I saw this I'd say, "wow, this must be a real good book because all these people are buying it....--------Mark

I think generally, the type of person who is keeping up with the Jones'...you mentioned that book Time for Truth. I know people who read it...everyone in the office is reading it. They thought they had to read it.-------Doug

Sometimes you have to(read the List) to see if he(favorite author) has a new book out.-------Cynthia

Participants were asked to compare the ways they might utilize the Nielsen ratings with ways they might use the Best Sellers List. Their responses were quite illuminating. First, it appears that the Best Sellers list is more useful than is the Nielsen ratings. When asked why this is the case, most explained that we are dealing with two very different activities: television watching and book reading. Television viewing choices are relatively stable. People have their favorite shows and stick with them. It is not an activity that demands choices be made every time one decides to engage in that activity.

Television is easier. (Best Sellers List would influence me) more so than the TV ratings because with a book you usually think about it, but with TV you don't....TV is passive and reading is active.--------M!

TV is a habit and it is hard to break a habit. A book is something special. You get away from everything and read it...--------Diane2
With TV you can flip through it and books you can't.--------Dawn

Reading a book is an activity you're more involved with and TV is more passive.--------Pat

Another difference, having far reaching explanatory value, was mentioned in a discussion between some male panelists. While conversing they were able to draw some comparisons between the Best Sellers list and political candidate popularity polls. These two types of polls were thought to be similar in that they help to simplify complex situations. There are many books to choose from as there are many political candidates vying for voter support. How are we to know which books or candidates deserve our attention? Polls, they suggested, provide the individual with needed guidance, reducing their cognitive stress. The polls, whether it be the Best Sellers list or candidate popularity polls, narrow the field and help the individual to focus on a smaller set of stimuli. This is especially important in situations where the individual is undecided.

People who go into a bookstore are going to be people who may pay attention to facts that would change their mind. Whereas I think this (Nielsen ratings) is neutral....I think the book list is a little bit more of an information source for people who are browsing and don't have a particular aim, and can't look through thousands of books in that bookstore and therefore what that (Best Sellers List) tells them is that some of these names might be a little bit better than a book way in the back....It's more valuable than just picking something out of the rack by its cover.--------John
It has made me feel that the Best Sellers list has become a reflection of what companies want you to buy rather than what people as...a general population has mulled over and come on their own and decided this is a good piece of literature.-------Jack

I don't question the quality of your statement. It probably is very accurate. As a starting point, where there is something where you can get direction....They don't influence me. I'll read two or three reviews before I'll buy a book. But for someone who's not willing to do that and they need some information, some direction....-------John

You have so many choices these days, even among Democratic presidential candidates, that you can be assaulted. Who can even walk into a bookstore and browse through the books...So people are using this kind of stuff to sort out their opinion.-------John

Something just occurred to me when he mentioned the review thing. With polls, maybe people are using polls the same way with the presidential candidates. They just don't have enough time to....-------Doug

Maybe that's something for the American public. Maybe it is just really a kind of inchoate place for them. In the beginning at least they can look at a poll and then they can think about it and say, okay....Maybe, it's an early education.-------John

I think it is just the opposite. I think the polls keep them from thinking.-------Tom2

I think the irony of it is that the very process that gives us this information also keeps us from thinking.-------John

If we didn't have the polls, people would think about it more.-------Tom2

Polls, as described above, might perform the function of aiding the individual in his or her quest to exert some
cognitive organization over a complex environment. Overabundant stimuli are condensed by polls. As a few pointed out, polls provide some structure and present the individual with a starting point. However, as these participants also admitted it's a double-edged sword: the price for this cognitive aid is independent, well-thought out decisions. Some argued this is a rather steep price to pay, especially in considering some of the implications of this for democratic societies.

**POLL INFLUENCE**

Two conditions were identified under which polls might exert some influence. As is probably evident from the comments reported in this and the previous chapter, it appears that most believe that polls are most influential for those who are interested, but undecided. This should not come as any surprise considering the abundance of social and psychological literature describing the ways in which individuals attend to, interpret, and integrate information depending on their already developed opinions and/or attitudes.

As reported earlier in this chapter, many admitted that when reviewing poll results that are in basic agreement with their own opinions, they are more likely to judge that poll to be valid. Similarly, when the poll data contra-
dicts their held opinions, they are more likely to view that particular poll as being questionable. Of course, as with most all studies dealing with human behavior, there are exceptions to this. As one participant explained it, he's is more influenced by poll findings that contradict what he thought was the prevailing public opinion regarding a particular issue.

I'm also swayed by the results, in that, what's being said there influences me to some degree because I'm surprised that 64% of the people are saying that they would probably or definitely vote for a woman. I didn't think that we were that far along...I think what I'm saying is that I would take special note of this irrespective of the reliability I would take special note of it because I think the results are so interesting. And that, if only the results of a poll told me what I thought was obvious or to be expected, then I'm less influence by it. I don't remember it. So I might be more inclined to remember this because it just surprised me.--------Dick

Another important condition was alluded to regarding the potential influence of reported poll results. Participants differentiated between two consequential outcomes of being influenced by public opinion polls. Repeatedly, it was stated that if the negative consequences of following the reported opinion were low cost than they would be more likely to be influenced. However, if their being influenced would result in a high cost mistake, then they would be less inclined to be swayed by the poll data. This meant that credibility of the reported poll data was not always an issue. A negative evaluation of a poll's methodology
did not automatically banish the poll from the individuals purview. Instead other factors were considered. If the poll was viewed as being unreliable and/or invalid what would be the consequences of being influenced by the results? Would the costs be minimal or substantial? This distinction, or cost calculus, became most evident when discussing the consumer polls. Most agreed that the "Best of Columbus" poll was unreliable and was not representative of the overall population. Yet, many said they do pay attention to polls of this sort (for reasons reported above) and that they would be inclined to try one of the reported "bests". Why?

They believed that if they were influenced by the poll results and tried one of the recommended places (or watched a highly rated TV program) and afterwards did not agree with the "public's" evaluation, not much was lost. At most, discretionary funds spent on that "best" brunch could have been more pleasantly spent elsewhere else, or the time spend watching the television program could have been utilized in a more enjoyable way. These costs were considered to be negligible.

However, in some situations being influenced by a poll was perceived to be too costly. A decisional situation was identified where the cost of following a political poll was substantial. This individual stated that he would be
less inclined to follow candidate popularity polls. As he viewed it, an election poll was to be reviewed more critically than a frivolous consumer poll, since the vote decision is a far more serious decision than where one should go for Sunday brunch. It wasn't that a political poll would exert no influence on the individual's choices or behavior, but it would not be the only factor considered.

Another interesting slant on this cost calculus was the mention of the consequences of not following the poll results. This was discussed in relation to the "Best Sellers" list. Since the purchase of books could be considered by some to be an almost 'major' purchase with the cost ranging anywhere from $10 to $20+, it was believed that some guidance was needed. One is bombarded with new releases and needs some direction in their purchasing decision. Wasting a substantial amount of money on an underserving book was considered a high cost consequence. Therefore, if some guide does exist, such as the Best Sellers List, and one ignores this information the cost suffered might be too high.

Apparently, polls have the potential of exerting some influence in situations where the cost of the poll being incorrect is negligible and in cases where the cost of ignoring poll information might be too high. The following comments illustrate these two possibilities:
You don't actually have a great deal to lose, do you? (in response to someone's statement of being influenced by the "Best of Columbus" poll)-------Peter

If I eat it (voted "best" baked potato) and don't like it I say, "okay, I come out ahead".-------John

A person doesn't want to shell out $15.50 for a book that they know absolutely nothing about (agreeing with comments suggesting that the Best-sellers list is a valuable guide to consumers)-------Ed

Before reporting the results of the post-discussion questionnaire items which asked the participants to indicate how much influence various polls have on their perceptions and opinions, it is important to acknowledge some comments which indirectly alluded to the subtleties of the nature of poll influence. A couple of participants made comments about the far-reaching and somewhat subliminal impact of public opinion polls.

Anything you see is going to register somewhere.-------Stevel

The Columbus Monthly poll...I've read one of those ("Best of" polls) and it said something about the best (cookies) Cheryl's Cookies...and I went past the place and I looked at it and thought, I remembered it was in the poll and I went and I bought one...they're great!-------Toml

I pay attention (to "Best" polls or rankings) whether it be on books or records or whatever....I think it does influence people because it makes them look. Take records for instance, makes them look a little harder at the song the next time and think, "yes, maybe that is a good song." And, maybe it would have a little more influence on them....-------Christine
The post-discussion survey asked that the participants indicate how influential each of seven different poll types were on their opinions and perceptions (presuming a behavioral component to these psychological dispositions) (Table 5). By collapsing the greatly influential and somewhat influential responses and doing likewise with the not very influential and not at all influential categories, the results are more easily interpreted. Three poll types were rated as being influential by approximately half of the participants. Over 52% indicated that consumer polls were influential, almost 52% felt that way about the Best Sellers Book lists, and 48% responded so for economic/political issue polls. The least influential poll was the TV ratings. This is not surprising considering the findings reported above about the habitual nature of television watching and the ease, low cost, and immediacy of program selection searches. The poll types which were the most influential are, not surprisingly, similar to the ones mentioned during the group discussions. Consumer polls (polls such as the "Best of Columbus" poll) were the most influential, and as explained during the group sessions, this is probably because of the high interest exhibited in these types of polls coupled with the low cost consequences of being influenced. The Best Sellers list was rated second most influential, again reflecting the participants' com-
ments that such lists serve as a guide, organizing and/or narrowing the stimuli one has to contend with. Book buying was considered a high cost activity, therefore any guidance which might reduce the possibility of a negative outcome was welcomed. Economic and political issue polls ranked third in influence. One could speculate that these polls deal with issues that are quite complex and intellectually demanding. Polls simplify the world. Without having to expend much time or intellectual energy, one can operate under the delusion that they have a handle on domestic and international issues of the day. Guided by a belief in the correctness of the majority opinion, polls probably provide the individual with a sense of control over what might be perceived as unmanageable complexities. As one participant had commented about political polls in news magazines, "I guess I feel like I know something just by looking at these things." In commenting on polls, in general, a group member stated: "I think it is kind of a way of gathering information. Because it is so hard...it is one of the best ways for people to gather information. It's not perfect but it gives you an idea." Basically, these ratings echo the findings from the group discussions. However, one should be reminded of the possibility of spillover from the group talks to the questionnaire stage.
Table 5

POLL INFLUENCE ON OPINIONS/PERCEPTIONS

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<td>(01) 1.7</td>
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COLLAPSED CATEGORIES

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SOURCE PREFERENCE - POLLS VERSUS OTHER SOURCES

Many of the participants compared poll data with other sources of information and the relative influence each exerted. Those making such comparisons overwhelming preferred other sources to public opinion polls. The other sources mentioned were newspaper columnists, television news commentators, book review critics, and film reviews. Often, source preference was voluntarily stated while reviewing a specific poll. A group member would comment that the poll is interesting, however they personally prefer to base their decision/behavior on this other source. What follows are some of their comments illustrating their preferences: Starting with a conversation among a few group members discussing their preference for newspaper/television commentaries over polls.

If you see an analysis by Wicker or Reston or someone like that, if they say something it is usually pretty well thought out and I'll read it. If Reston says something and the polls contradict it, I'll go with Reston as far as analysis.... I'd be influenced by commentary, whereas I don't feel as influenced by the polls as much.--------Stevel

With the commentaries, especially if you're not up on the issue, they'll say, "let me lay out a case for you" and if you accept the premises you have to accept the conclusions. They are going to lay out a logical case and if you don't know it yourself, it will have a heavy influence on you.--------Scott

I'm not going to buy the consensus of America on hardly anything, but I certainly would buy an informed source's opinion a lot more than I would a referendum. I'd form my own opinion sooner
than...before I'd believe a referendum.-------Dana

I read a lot of book reviews.-------Robert

If you read the critic all the time, you tend to get a feeling of what the person likes, and you generally agree with them or generally disagree. I think it depends on your perceptions of the reviewer's taste.-------Steve

But as far as telling me what book to go out and read, no, I'll read the reviews in the Sunday paper about the book.-------Grl.

As a starting point, where there is something you can get directions, I believe it's (Bestsellers List) useful. They don't influence me. I'll read two or three reviews before I'll buy a book. But for someone who's not willing to do that and they need some information, some direction....-------John

Seriously, I think people are starting to use those types of columns (newspaper political columnists) the same way they use movie reviews, book reviews. How many of you go to see a movie based on a review or a couple of reviews? You have to use some kind of an initial source.-------Doug

One group member remarked that she would give equal weight to both poll results and the opinions of identified experts. Her statement was made in reference to polls about top box office movies, believing that if everyone was going to see that particular movies there had to be something to it. However, she also was attentive to movie reviews, and with these two sources of information would make a decision whether or not to view a particular film. This individual also stated a preference for the "Voices from across the USA" interviews because it reflects the
views of ordinary people, and was devoid of the problematic jargon of the experts. Speaking to this issue, one group member voiced his concern about what he perceived to be the public's preference for the "common man's" opinion over the expert's:

I think the interesting thing is that it could be that there are some people who are going to think that Mr. Murray, Vice President of Finance (one of the respondents in the "Voices" interview) is as qualified and is as competent to make commentary as syndicated columnists or whoever. I think it's an interesting possibility that people have gotten so cynical about the quality of the authorities that they think that a barber has just as much to say to you as someone who has spent 20 years in Washington.--------Dick

According to most of the comments above, the opinions of experts are more influential than mass opinion. This is not surprising in light of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) seminal work on opinion leadership. They found that the opinions of community leaders carried much weight in the development of the public's opinions. Although there have been many studies expanding upon and qualifying the views of that pioneer study, the comments presented here do seem to indicate that most individuals would rather rely on expert, informed opinions than those of the (presumed) uninformed masses. Their preference for expert opinion was not based solely on a disdain for 'proletarian opinions.' As they explained it, with recognized critics and columnists one is able to gain an understanding of from whence
these recommendations and pronouncements come. Through continued attention to the critics' reviews, the experts' likes and dislikes become evident, and one has had opportunities to compare their own evaluations with those of the experts. Recommendations have been tried and judged, providing an evaluation framework. Critics usually present arguments in support of their recommendations, enabling the individual to judge the merits of their conclusions. The individual can also develop a sense of the critic's/columnist's biases and preferences which helps in evaluating the recommendations. If a movie critic whom I've followed for quite some time recommends a particular film, my decision whether or not to view that film will depend upon my appraisal of that particular critic's past performance. This is certainly preferable to a public opinion poll reporting the results of a national sample of 'average' citizens of whom one knows very little.

Interestingly, two participants presented reasons why they thought the public would prefer public opinion polls over these other sources mentioned. They speculated that the average citizen would find publicized poll information to be quite useful:

I think that the opinion polls more than anything else will affect the general public because they (polls) are easy to digest, nice encapsulated...pick the winners or losers....--------Doug
A section in the post-discussion questionnaire had listed seven different media sources and asked the respondent whether he or she would mention each of these sources as persuasive evidence in arguments with friends, family, or co-workers. As the figures in Table 6 indicate, 32.8% would not mention public opinion polls in an attempt to bolster their argument: Polls are by far the least preferred source.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Preference</th>
<th>Would Mention (N)</th>
<th>Might Mention</th>
<th>Not Mention</th>
<th>DK/NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newsp./mag. articles</td>
<td>(38) 65.5</td>
<td>(18) 31.0</td>
<td>(01) 1.7</td>
<td>(01) 1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsp./mag. editorials</td>
<td>(22) 37.9</td>
<td>(23) 39.7</td>
<td>(08) 13.8</td>
<td>(05) 8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pub. Op. polls</td>
<td>(06) 10.3</td>
<td>(29) 50.0</td>
<td>(19) 32.8</td>
<td>(04) 6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News stories</td>
<td>(19) 32.8</td>
<td>(28) 48.3</td>
<td>(07) 12.1</td>
<td>(04) 6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News edit./comm.</td>
<td>(13) 22.4</td>
<td>(24) 41.4</td>
<td>(14) 24.1</td>
<td>(07) 12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Talk show interviews</td>
<td>(14) 24.1</td>
<td>(24) 41.4</td>
<td>(16) 27.6</td>
<td>(04) 6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio news</td>
<td>(20) 34.5</td>
<td>(27) 46.6</td>
<td>(08) 13.8</td>
<td>(03) 5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering that the previous 90 minutes were spent talking about public opinion polls, one might have thought that the preference for polls would have been exaggerated. One explanation might be that the respondents had, by this time, 'overdosed' on talk of polls and never wanted to see another poll as long as they lived. Another possible explanation is that since much of the previous discussion had centered on the negative aspects of polls, this possibly influencing their low regard for polls compared to other sources. Yet, maybe the results are truly indicative of how people feel about public opinion polls: They just don't perceive such information as being as important as information from the other sources. Again, results should be interpreted cautiously due to the likely contamination from the prior group discussions.

CONCLUSION

Decades of psychological research have provided us with theories explaining the individual's psychological and behavioral reactions to information that agrees or disagrees with their held positions. Information that is consonant with existing opinions is more readily selected, accepted, and integrated than is information that creates a state of cognitive dissonance for the individual. Credibility of information source is definitely connected to
these selection and assimilation processes. If the material presented is congruent with existing beliefs, then it is highly likely that the information source will be perceived as being credible. Likewise, according to the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, if the material is incongruent with existing beliefs, then the individual must either change his or her opinion or find a way of ignoring the contradictory information. Discrediting the source of the information appears to be one way of creating cognitive balance without having to alter one's opinion. Apparently, there are a number of ways of diminishing the impact of potentially discordant information. This strategy of discreditation is probably psychologically preferable.

Participants' reactions to the polls under review were clearly in line with these psychological theories. Those who were in agreement with the poll information rarely scrutinized the methodology or other relevant aspects of the poll. As one group member stated, "Why look a gift horse in the mouth?" Others, in disagreement with the poll information, were more critical of the poll methodology, hoping to discredit the information presented. Only a couple of participants commented that contradictory poll information presented them with 'food for thought' thereby increasing their attention and interest in the data presented. It is likely that for these few individuals, and
for those whom had not yet developed an opinion on a particular issue, poll results might exert more influence.

Whether or not the individual had ever participated in a public opinion survey, or knew anyone who had, was another factor related to one's perceptions of poll credibility. With all the talk about sample size and poll results being representative of the general population, many questioned why they had never been contacted to participate in a poll. They're members of the public, aren't they? And, if everyone has an equal chance of being contacted why haven't they, especially considering the proliferation of polls? Theirs or a friend's number should have come up!

Interestingly, those who had participated, whether it was a legitimate poll or a marketing ploy (commercial or political), were left with negative impressions about the practice of public opinion polling. They condemned their own behavior (lying to interviewers, etc.) or the pollsters (biased interviewers, poor questionnaires, etc.).

Fascinating similarities existed between the comments elicited regarding the utilization of the various polls and the research on media uses and gratifications. To date, no other research has been directed towards understanding how individuals use public opinion polls; what gratifications are sought and served; or how polls compare to other sources in fulfilling certain identified needs.(5) This

(5) Rayburn, Palmgreen, and Acker have applied the uses and
research has taken a first step in that direction. Participants alluded to various reasons why they pay attention to public opinion polls, and the different ways in which they might utilize poll information. As described in this chapter, public opinion polls serve as a form of entertainment for some, diversion for others, and often provide needed information and guidance to the audience member. These uses were found to be dependent upon not only the poll type, but also (and possibly more importantly) were related to the specific social and psychological needs of the individual at that specific time.

Participants' perceptions about how poll results might influence themselves and others was also examined. An interesting condition was identified, one cited as being an important factor in deciding whether or not one should be influenced (sometimes behaviorally) by reported poll results. This factor was referred to as the cost calculus. What was the cost of following the public's opinion (public loosely defined)? Low cost consequences meant that there was a greater propensity to be influenced by the poll, irregardless of the poll's perceived credibility. Some also considered the cost of not acting on the poll information. This condition of consequential outcomes is one that has not been previously identified in studies concerning gratifications framework in an attempt to understand involvement with network morning news programs.
poll influence or poll effects on the individual.

In analyzing the group members' comments, a careful reading between the lines seemed to suggest that polls might be exerting more behavioral influence on the individual than previous research has been able to detect (as argued in an earlier chapter, long term, subtle effects are not easily measured by our methods). Remarks offered by a couple of participants pointed to the subliminal effects of public opinion polls. As one member argued, "Everything we read registers somewhere!" Another described his personal experience of being influenced (unintentionally and subconsciously) by a consumer poll read some time prior to his poll-induced behavior. These findings suggest that Krugman's (1965) Krugman and Hartley's (1969), and Ray, et al.'s (1973) research on learning without involvement might warrant further study vis-a-vis public opinion polls. These scholars have conducted research on the effects or impact of television advertising finding that advertisements are most effective when the audience member is disinterested and psychologically/cognitively relaxed. This is referred to as learning without involvement or unanchored learning where there exists no cause, on the part of the individual, for resistance to the message.

This does not mean that every poll read will have this "sleeper effect" or subliminal impact on the individual.
However, in conjunction with the findings reported on poll use, one could speculate how low involvement learning might occur, especially when the individual uses the particular poll to serve an entertainment, diversionary, or escapist need.

Comparisons of source preference seemed to suggest that, for many, expert opinion was prefered over mass opinion as reported in public opinion polls. Poll information fared rather poorly when compared to other sources of information one might choose to support one's argument. The upper socio-economic bias of the participants might possibly explain their 'elitist' attitudes. Yet, their reasons for preferring the other sources of information seemed plausible and quite reasonable in the decision making context. These findings concur with the works by Katz and Lazarsfeld, and Rogers and Shoemaker (1971). Elites, perceived opinion leaders and trend-setters are the more influential and persuasive members of communities, their opinions and actions setting the example for others. Yet, the comments by group members also suggest a somewhat contradictory need: the need to find out how others, like themselves, think, feel, and behave. Polls apparently were able to serve this function. These questions and issues will be further discussed in the concluding chapter.
Chapter V
POLITICAL POLLS

INTRODUCTION

The topic of political polls will be specifically addressed in this chapter. Three types of polls will be discussed; political polls (generic), network exit polls and attendant early election projections, and Congressional Representatives' mail surveys. Although some comments regarding political polls were reported in previous chapters the importance of this topic merits a more thorough treatment. Since the discussion group sessions were held during the height of the Democratic primaries and caucuses (March - May, 1984) a great deal of emphasis was placed on the race for the Presidency and the role of political opinion polls in the electoral process. There was no shortage of ideas concerning the current state of affairs and prescriptions for future elections. The first two sections of this chapter will address political polls in general, and network exit polling. The third section of this chapter will discuss reactions to the Congressional Representative's mail survey.

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As will become evident, comments elicited varied with regard to the unit of analysis. Some discussed poll influence and utilization of the poll information from the perspective of the individual (using either the first or third person). Others talked about the influence such polls have on political campaigns and the electoral process, and ultimately on our democratic system. A few made the important connection between the polls, individual behavior influenced by political polls, and the impact of these relationships on electoral processes.

It was argued by many that the impact of political polls on the individual, and subsequently on society, is definitely related to some basic personality characteristics of the common citizen. The average man/woman is perceived as being ignorant, lazy, uninformed, and apathetic. It is an unthinking, lazy public that needs quick answers. It is the uneducated who won't take the time to investigate issues and candidates. It is the sheep-like who are ready and eager to "jump on the bandwagon" so they can be socially accepted, avoiding the possibility of social isolation, the perceived penance for holding a minority opinion. This scathing indictment provided the basis for participants' arguments concerning poll influence: the unthinking public needs the information presented in political polls. Participants often made remarks distancing themselves from the
public they had described. They were more interested, informed, and too intelligent to base such important decisions on something as superficial and ephemeral as a political poll. Perhaps they were correct in their assessment of the public and of themselves. However, the correctness of their perceptions is not at issue. What is at issue are their beliefs that polls are influencing the citizenry and the democratic processes.

POLITICAL POLLS (GENERICS)

Are individuals influenced by political polls? Under what conditions do these polls have the potential to affect one's opinion or behavior? What functions do political polls serve for the individual? How much of an impact do these polls have on the electoral process? What are the media's relationship to the polls they publicize? These questions will be addressed in this section, beginning with participants' perceptions concerning the influence of political polls on the individual.

INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL POLLS ON THE INDIVIDUAL

As previously stated, most believed that it is the "unthinking" public who will be influenced by political polls. Those who are not willing to expend the necessary time and energy find poll information an attractive commodity: it is information that is easy to interpret and pro-
cess. Essentially political polls inform us about who is ahead and who is behind. For the lazy, unthinking, uninformed public this was perceived as being the most important information. Candidate preference polls were also thought to influence undecided voters. These individuals were believed to be relatively interested in the campaign but haven't yet decided for whom to cast their vote. Polls helped them to decide. As some saw it:

I think that what we're talking about here is show business. And, in fact, when you're dealing with people who can be moved by show business, moved by the screen, who look only for headlines, rather than the in-depth... and you put together a power of a poll which is, statistically if you've ever done any, you know it's incredibly close. So, I think you're dealing with a very common denominator, a very base denominator which is an unthinking public.-------John

I think that the opinion polls more than anything will affect the general public because they are easy to digest, nice encapsulated... pick the winners or losers and decide whether you want to go with the winning one, or bet on the long shot.-------Doug

I think public opinion polls have been, in this primary race, have been very influential in changing people... in helping people who are undecided to make up their minds. Influencing them, not helping them to make a rational, logical decision based on issues or beliefs... You can see that by what happened to Gary Hart. The polls that came out after Iowa and showed that he had... he was getting better and increasing, and I think that helped his cause. I think people gave him money and worked harder for him, went out and voted for him and helped him out. So, I think the polls can help a political candidate. I don't know whether they help you and I, but they sure, this year anyway, helped him so far.-------David
There are so many people who don't know much about politics so they would be influenced. They want to go vote and they don't know just which way to go so they might pick up something like this (candidate preference poll) and be influenced by it.--------Ester

INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL POLLS ON CAMPAIGN POLITICS

Many believed that political polls have definitely changed campaign politics, and unfortunately not always for the better. Data collected through modern polling techniques provides the candidate and his/her campaign staff with invaluable information. The more cynical (or perhaps more realistic) group members likened political polls to product market research, the only difference being that political polls aid in the packaging and selling of candidates. Such information might help the candidate in developing or modifying his or her policy positions, bending to the will of majority opinion. Polls were also thought to provide essential information to the candidate concerning his or her chances of electoral success, enabling the contender to withdraw from the race if he/she rated poorly in the polls. The following comments illustrate participants' perceptions about the role of political polls in campaigns:

I don't know how much of a purpose they're (political polls) are serving as an educational tool, but I sure know that the candidates are using them.--------David

They gear and market their candidates based on this.--------Dana
After giving it some more thought...I definitely do think that they're (political polls) detrimental and I'd like to see less of them...I think the candidates or politicians watch the polls and then maybe take a stand on something as the result of how, maybe not just one poll but maybe several polls turn out. And, I have to wonder maybe he (Reagan) took a stand because there were polls or opinions expressed that, "yes, women need to be considered" so he picked up on that and he preached or campaigned that "I'd correct this once I get into office." And, then what did he do? use it as a crutch or they'll change not only their appearance but maybe even what they'll say just to get the votes. And, then where are we?------Barb

It also makes a tremendous difference, I think, whether or not they will stick it out in the race. I think that...the candidates themselves will think, "how well am I doing." And, how well they're doing is based...on how well they're doing in the polls. If they're only getting 4% I think that they will check out fast.------Dick

**INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL POLLS ON THE ELECTORATE**

The influence of political polls on the electorate was described as having a 'spiraling' effect. Publicized poll results, indicating candidate preferences, build upon themselves. People take note of the majority's opinion/preferences and "jump on the bandwagon", increasing the support for the particular candidate or issue. The process was described as such:

I think that initially, those polls are pretty damn accurate. I have confidence in a lot of statistics and a sample that goes as far as they go. I think it begins to roll, to catch momentum and begin indeed to turn.------John

Sometimes I feel like it's a service. A feedback system by which...it just sort of catches on itself and goes around in circles. One opinion
poll says this is what the majority is thinking which is sort of...it's very often a spiral. And then the more people believe that (majority opinion) and then more people believe that and then the next public opinion poll will be even more in favor, and more people will go...Really, who is Gary Hart...maybe I'm for Gary Hart. I was trying to remember before polls because they've been around for a long time. But I think that what bothers me is that it defines winners and losers very early. I do think that there is a tendency to want to vote for a winner...It's not just public opinion polls. There are actual votes being cast as well, so it's not just the public opinion polls. I think it's the whole primary process, it's like one big public opinion poll.-------Leslie

And, as this conversation suggests:

I think for some people, particularly in the last week or so towards the election, a poll does have an effect because people do want to vote for a winner. I don't know how many people do...-------Michael

With any psychological study, (it) would show that a person wishes to be accepted by their peers and will go along with what the majority says.-------Steve3

So why do they turn to the underdog?-------John

It's like after the election with Reagan and Carter. They did a poll six months later and many more people had said they had voted for Reagan than actually did.-------Bill

Interestingly, a couple of group members, who were quite dismayed with all types of public opinion polls, believed that the impact of political polls has been substantially mitigated. In recent years there has been a tremendous upsurge in the number of polls commissioned and publicized. This proliferation of political polls has undermined their
importance, hence their potential influence. As their discussion describes it:

I don't think they (political polls) had as much (of an impact) as they did have a few years ago.--------Eunice

And, they are fouling things up and I think people are fed up with the polls.--------Cynthia

I think people hadn't had them so much and they really believed them a lot more.--------Eunice

They didn't have them every week. Even before the election is done they're already giving another poll for another state.--------Cynthia

USES OF POLL INFORMATION - THE INDIVIDUAL

Political polls were believed to serve a variety of needs for the individual. Besides providing the unthinking citizenry with nicely encapsulated, easily interpretable information needed for their vote choice, polls were cited as serving a number of other functions. Again, using the uses and gratifications framework provided by communication scholars, one can identify a number of needs served by political polls. As with the discussion in the previous chapter regarding uses of the non-political polls, it is important to note that a specific poll type, in this case a political poll, can be, and in fact is, utilized differently by different people depending on their particular social and/or psychological needs. Through their discussions, group members identified these uses of political polls:
they provide needed information; serve as a medium relaying the public's opinion to the government and leaders; and provide information about others in society.

As described in Chapter 3, polls, especially during the primary campaigns, provided the electorate with information that helped winnow the list of political contenders. Parallels were drawn between the Best Sellers Book list and candidate preference polls, identifying ways that some might use the reported information to simplify complex situations. There are many books to choose from just as there are many political candidates vying for support. Whether it be the Best Sellers list or a candidate popularity poll, the data provided help one to focus in on a smaller set of stimuli, narrowing the field of competition. This was thought to be especially important in situations where the individual is undecided.

Two additional scenarios were described where poll information would be utilized. However, in these cases the individual was neither uninformed nor undecided. In one situation, political poll data provided information upon which one strategically based his/her primary vote choice. As one participant described it:

Suppose we're Democrats and we're trying to pick the guy who can beat Reagan and we write off Glenn because he's got such a low showing. So people who wanted Glenn wouldn't vote for him because he wouldn't be a viable candidate against Reagan. So, this poll might influence us to vote for Mondale.-------Dana
A couple of other group members mentioned the demographic information usually provided with the poll results and commented that these data were helpful, when it was supplied. Demographic information provided the individual with information about his/her reference groups. According to numerous studies on voting behavior, reference group identification does have an impact on one's political behavior. As this conversation illustrates:

I think, as one example, Bruce Morton on CBS is trying hard to make some sense out of the polls and to analyze the results. And, that's a helpful piece of information to know about the demographics, who voted how, and why? I know where I'm at. Demographically, I'm supposed to be a Hart supporter and I'm not. So that's interesting to me. Why wouldn't I go along with that trend in the polls?-------Michael

What are you doing right, or what is everyone doing wrong?-------Robert

Is there a right and is there a wrong? I think they do provide me with valuable information.-------Michael

Not only do political polls provide information which is used in one's vote decision, but polls also provide people with information about others in society. It is believed that the need to know about how others think and feel is a basic one. Noelle-Neumann has hypothesized that individuals strive to ascertain the current majority opinion on a number of issues on the public agenda. Since humans have a need to be accepted and integrated into their environment, one way of avoiding social isolation is by conforming to
the dominant opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1977). Political polls (and other types of polls) can provide information about how others in our community think and behave. For those who are guided by this need to conform to the prevalent opinion, polls might serve as an important informational source. As one participant stated, "It (political polls) shows you what your neighbors think." Polls, then, might connect some individuals with others in their community.

As described in a previous section, some group members alluded to the use of political polls in the development or modification of candidates' issue agendas. This strategic utilization of poll information was viewed with some skepticism, for most were critical of what has been referred to as the "New Politics": the packaging and selling of candidates. However, a few group members took a different perspective on this. Although acknowledging the actual, and potential, misuse of poll information by candidates, they saw a positive role played by political polls in democratic societies. Polls communicate. They are a medium through which the views of the governed could be communicated to those who govern (or hope to govern).

More positively, I think polls serve the people. It's a real sense of power. I mean, how can we collectivize ourselves and how we feel and get it out there so the God-damned people in government hear. And that is what a poll can do for people. It's a sense like, "Wow, 87% of us feel whatever the thing is." It's one of the few ways in which
the media is talking for us to the politicians, rather than the politicians and the media experts talking it out.-------Jack

The following comment speaks to the same issue: political polls serving as a communication linkage between the public and policy makers. Yet, this participant takes the argument one step further questioning the use of poll information in this communication process, more specifically the attention given to minority views.

I guess it frustrated me a little bit though because I think it's important that the public be heard, and I think like, what's the best way to do it? Really, if the general consensus in the nation is that, "no, we're in fact not prepared for war (getting back to the "Voices" article) I think that needs to be heard and it needs to be dealt with. So, I don't know if you can really do away with polls or anything, but...The thing that really bothers me about these is that those of us who don't agree with it and that we're going to be grouped together with the rest of them or something...Maybe, a politician is going to read something about a poll on the nuclear arms freeze or whatever and maybe they would take...and they're just going to be concerned with the greater percentage whether it be the people for it or the people against it. And, then they're going to take that stand and not be real open-minded about the other stand...-------Barb

POLITICAL POLLS AND THE NETWORKS

There was no shortage of opinions regarding the networks' self-serving involvement with political polling. The aforementioned comment suggesting that the media speaks for the public through the commission and publicizing of
political polls was certainly a minority position. Most holding views on this issue saw the relationship as definitely benefitting the networks at the expense of the public. Clearly, political polls were not perceived as a public service. Networks need political polls. Whether they simply report the results of polls commissioned by others, or the results of their own in-house polls, this information is crucial to their organizations. As some members argued, modern political campaigns are extraordinarily lengthy. Almost one year prior to the election, reports start to emerge about the popularity of the various candidates vying for the elective office. The networks must create an atmosphere of excitement around what would likely be a fairly boring, mundane series of events. Hence, the horse-race approach to the reporting of political races: who's ahead, and who's behind reported on a daily basis.

I think there are two reasons why there's a fascination with them (polls). Partly because it's a real glib thing for the media to use. It's an easy kind of catchy, grabby like a score in a football game. And, if in fact you look at the presidential campaign, what's so stressful about it is that they're trying to stretch out this eleven month process using all the techniques that are appropriate to a two hour football game. And how do you keep people from getting bored? Well, if the football game is over in two hours but you have this presidential campaign that can go on forever. The idea being that the media end to use, or TV especially, catchy kinds of things. And that's what the poll does because you can see clear numbers -- "Oh, he's ahead! Oh no! He's falling back...------Jack
One group member, who happened to be a reporter for one of the wire services, had some definite ideas about the role of political polls in campaigns. Having covered a number of political races, he had witnessed changes in the way political polls were reported on by the media. What follows is his historical account of what has transpired:

The first thing you have to look at is the historical perspective on the way these things became reported. Reported originally, when the results were gotten a hold of because many times this is what supposedly the campaigns were using as its... it was sort of a look inside of a campaign. This goes back to the LBJ era. The reporting that was done at that time was, "Well folks, LBJ has this as a poll and he's using this..." Then it got to be, "if they can do it we (media) can do it, and we can do it more unbiasedly." So the networks got involved and they got involved in the National Election Service and that sort of thing and then it just sort of snowballed from then. And now, you're into the whole promotional sort of thing and, "We can call it eight days before the election happens." As a reporter, I hate TV myself because you get into situations like New Hampshire...-----Doug

This participant went on to comment on the media's manufacturing of news; using their own in-house polls as the "grist for the mill." Mass media organizations are profit-making entities operating under a number of constraints. Limited personnel, often intractable deadlines, and budget considerations (just to name a few) certainly impact upon the news-gathering and reporting activities. These internal constraints, coupled with external conditions, mandate certain operational procedures.(6) As

(6) For a very brief and basic discussion of some of the
is evident from the titles of a number of scholarly works on the business of news reporting, news is often created, made, or manufactured by media organizations. In-house political polls are a case in point. As was explained:

I have this real problem with this 'real time' journalism. Which I think is what a lot of people are complaining about. This whole thing of, "we're going to give it to you as it happens." Journalism is, once it happened then you can sit back and report it and where you need some explanation, some analysis you can go to someone and get it. That's the problem with the present polls...Essentially, journalists are creating their own news by doing their own polls. It was different when we were reporting polls that were being done by candidates and we could get some candidate's people to tell us, "Yes, that is what our polls show." And then we could put it in the context of, "Well, they're using this poll and shaping the campaign based on the results of the poll. To me that's news... A lot of it is TV too. Again, that scarce resource thing, and to some extent, the producer has to figure out how to deploy the resources and where are they most likely to have the winners and the losers, and in between you catch them as you can.-------Doug

This individual, responding to other's comments about political polls, berated the networks for not being more forthcoming about what the poll results actually mean:

You were saying, John, that when the poll starts out it's accurate. What people fail to realize, especially television tends to do this: they don't sit there and spend their precious 30 seconds by saying, "By the way, it was done this way." They say the poll results... They fail to say that a poll is a snapshot in time...-------Doug

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external and internal constraints of media organizations see Becker's Discovering Mass Communication, chapters 2 and 3.
NETWORK EXIT POLLING AND EARLY PROJECTIONS

Network exit polls have been the subject of much critical debate. It has been asked, "what, if any, effect do these projections have on the electorate?" This section will address a number of questions related to the potential impact of information of this kind on the public. Among the issues discussed will be the perceived influence of early projections on the electorate, individuals' use of this information, the networks' interest in exit polls and the broadcasting of early projections, the ability of the public to distinguish between journalistic speculations and the statistical projections; and individual's understanding of the methods employed by the networks.

INFLUENCE OF EARLY PROJECTIONS ON THE ELECTORATE

With the exception of a handful of participants, an overwhelming majority firmly believed that the networks' early projections of political races did have a definite impact on voting behavior. As to what type of impact, opinions varied.

Most believed that rather than mobilizing voters, early projections, especially in cases where one's preferred candidate was not the projected winner, gave rise to feelings of futility. The behavioral component of this is that the individual decides not to expend valuable time voting for a loser. The following comments speak to the 'stay-at-home'
effect when one's preferred candidate is the projected winner:

I'd go out and vote for the candidate of my choice, but if he's way, way ahead, I might just decide to stay home. Having an opportunity to influence somebody's vote on that particular day is slightly repugnant. I think that the issue is that they are allowed to make those predictions before the polls have closed.-------Sally

I think the early projections hurt because someone sitting at home watching TV and seeing that their candidate is winning, and has a slight headache and decides, "Well, I'm not going to go out and vote." and stays home.-------Pat

You may not go if you think your man is going to win. I think it would influence someone. If there is one person I think they should hold it back. And they're very accurate now. I think it might influence me if I thought it was going to be a shoe-in and I just wouldn't go.-------Mary.

Another scenario was described where one might stay at home if it was projected that their candidate was winning by a landslide. Again, the voter's calculus would say that it was an irrational expenditure of time and energy to go out and vote for an already ordained winner.

Some indicated they thought that they or others would stay at home under another set of conditions: if their preferred candidate was not the projected winner:

I think that if it is a rainy day... and you come home from work and it's raining like hell and they say Reagan is running away with it, you're going to say, "Well, my vote doesn't matter."-------Bill

I know people that it does influence. They feel that their candidate has lost anyway so why bother.-------Ann
I don't believe it should be allowed to be broadcast until everybody in the nation has had a chance to vote. Because, when you look at it, if somebody knows that one candidate is ahead by 50%-60% when only 20% of the vote is in...I'm just comparing say New York on the East Coast and Hawaii on the West Coast...there's some five to six hours time difference. So, say Reagan is winning by 30% and they have the East Coast reported in, why is the person in Hawaii even going to go out to vote? His vote is so minuscule compared to the East Coast vote. I think it is unfair to the West Coast people.-------Simon

I don't think Carter would've lost by that much if the people had went out...if he (Reagan) is predicted the winner, who'll go and vote for Carter, period? Why even go and stand in line and vote for him when there's no way your vote is ... not going to mean nothing. And that's what hurts too. You're always told that your vote counts, and that goes to prove your vote don't count.-------Cynt thia

Some believed that broadcasts projecting the victor would result in a bandwagon situation: voters would rush out and vote for the projected winner. A few participants believed that early projections would incite some voters to get out and vote for the losing candidate hoping that this last minute rally would propel the underdog to a position of victory.

Some group members believed that the early projections would encourage voting. In this case, information about the winning candidate would influence some to get out and vote, addressing their particular need to side with the majority. Some members of the public would "jump on the bandwagon", finding that the early network projections serve a positive function. As it was described:
That's why I get upset, when they start putting on the regular TV or the radio the results, because people will get on the bandwagon and go with the winner.--------Dianel

Sometimes, it is fun to see. But I think that they are a little leading because you know, you want to be on the side of the winner.--------Diane2

I feel that it is probably incredibly detrimental. When you consider how you can be easily swayed by various...especially by wanting to go with the winner.--------Peter

If the person on the high end is (winning) a lot of people want to go with that person. They're going to go out and vote. He's winning so I'm going to go out and vote for him, so I can say I voted for him.--------Mark

You could think they do need my vote and I'll go out and make my vote count.--------Nora

Maybe you were tired that night and decided, "No, I'm not going to go out," and you see it's really close and you feel like your vote is going to make it.--------Devonna

Some were concerned that the early projections might have some impact on congressional, state, and local races. If broadcasts resulted in the stay-at-home phenomenon then these contests would suffer from lower voter turnout.

It not only hurts Reagan or whoever the presidential thing is but all the other people who could be elected on a local basis. If they don't go out to vote because they don't want to vote in the presidential (race) then they don't press levers for anybody else.--------Dick

It hurts issues so much.--------Verla

There's no need to speculate about it...The statistical studies that have been done do show that there was a definite impact by the projections
that were being broadcast. It didn't impact on the presidential race as it did as much on the local and state races.-------Michael

For the few who weren't totally convinced that projections had an impact on voting behavior, it should be noted that they had difficulty analyzing the situation outside of their own experiences. Since they weren't influenced, they could not conceive of others being affected:

It has no bearing. It did not change my vote one bit. I'm fascinated by how I voted and how it came out.-------John

I think if you made a decision within yourself to go to the polls then these polls don't really make a difference. You are going to vote. You know pretty much how you're going to vote and when you get there and the hour of truth comes, you're going to pull the lever the way you had already decided you were going to vote.-------Parker

Underlying most comments about exit poll effects was the familiar theme concerning the unthinking, apathetic public. These individuals are perceived as being most susceptible to the influential impact of the early projections:

I think it is so...the sad thing is that the recording of any trend can affect the change that it does...that's a sad commentary on our society. That we lack so few principles that we strongly believe in and understand about how things are operated that we can be persuaded by how people are voting...for no other reason than that you want to be with the winners. It's a lack of commitment and a lack of...personal responsibility that upsets me.-------Ken

The people...the two ends of the extreme, they are going to vote however. Their minds are clearly made up. It's the group in the middle that is still wavering and you start getting in returns from the East and I have a hunch it could really swing a lot of people.-------Peter
A few astute observers of the political scene, without prompting, mentioned the proposed congressional legislation prohibiting the broadcasting of early elections returns. Although most of them believed the reporting of projected winners was detrimental to the democratic processes, they voiced concern about government abridgement of the freedom of the press. For all but one, their liberal predilections overrode their concerns about the negative influence early projections might have on the electorate. As they explained it:

But there is another side to it and that is... I'm firmly on the offense on this one... it bothers me because one part of me is really afraid of an infringement on the First Amendment. Who is in a position to tell people not to broadcast the news. If they have information... I don't know if it's a right or a privilege or whatever but I sure as hell would not like to be in a position of saying, "I don't care if you know it, you can't say anything about it." That scares me.--------Dick

Because of the whole issue of freedom of the press I think we do have a right to know. I think the press has a right... a right to report it if they feel it's newsworthy.--------David

I think it comes down to the point of when the free press starts infringing upon the right of the people to elect their government; to run their government. There you draw the line. That's as far as the media can go.--------Tom2
UTILITY OF EARLY PROJECTIONS

For most, the early projections served no worthwhile purpose. Only a few group members mentioned some positive uses of this information. One participant found the projections to be very informative, keeping her apprised of the current vote tabulations.

I find it informative to see how things are going. I don't like sitting and waiting for hours and hours to find out. I like being kept up on what's happening...------Dawn

For another group member, the electoral projections served as a form of entertainment.

I like to watch them. I like to watch them as they start coming in and to see how far the margins are. I do like watching it. It's entertaining.------Devonna

Network projections were viewed more pragmatically by one participant who used this information in planning his evening activities:

I was sitting there glued to the TV and they said, 'with two percent of the polling places reporting in, Reagan is projected to win." And, then they went on and said it would be a landslide. Well, I immediately changed clothes and headed downtown to a big party. I thought I might as well start now and get a good night's sleep...When I went to that party downtown, obviously everybody there had voted for Reagan...so it didn't influence them. But, it did impress me at the time with ABC News, and I pretty much watch them whenever I watch the national news...------David

Interestingly, two participants were displeased with the early projections because it precluded enjoyable social
interaction that is dependent upon the "old-fashioned" way of declaring winners: waiting until the early morning hours when just about all the precincts have reported in!

I think it should be stopped personally. I happen to like waiting until three o'clock in the morning when the California results come in.-------Doug

Don't you think it also takes the fun out of election night? We used to have a party all the time and now the party's over (in a few minutes).------Verla

THE NETWORKS' INTEREST IN EARLY PROJECTIONS

Why do the networks broadcast the projected winners? This question was asked of the participants, in the hope that their responses would provide more insight into their evaluations of this activity. The overall consensus was that the networks project winners because it boosts their ratings. The networks think that this type of "news" excites the audience. Viewers will tune in and stay tuned. If this is indeed the case, many believed that the networks have misjudged the situation and their audiences. They believed that the networks have manufactured this competitive situation, on the assumption that viewers are hungry for this electoral information. Contrary to the networks beliefs, group members argued that they don't want, or expect, the networks to provide this information and that the public certainly doesn't make program or channel selections based on this criterion. There is no real market for
this type of news, and at least from participants' com-
ments, the viewing public is onto their "game." As the
following comments indicate, network election night cover-
age is not providing the public with important, much needed
information as a public service. Rather, the networks are
creating news and are hyping their news product in an
attempt to increase their respective ratings.

The drama is that they are able to interview peo-
ple, get a sample and project. It's just good
show biz.------John

I suppose that in their next ad campaign they can
say, "We called it first."------Sally

My impresssion is that there's a mentality that
newspeople have generally, and that is that if
you can get it first, that makes you a winner.
That's the name of the game: if you can get the
story faster than anybody else, irrespective of
its impact, that makes you "hot stuff"; it
increases your ratings; and it means that you're
a better newsman...I think that they think that
people will turn on ABC, if ABC got the story
first as opposed to CBS...But, I think the aver-
age person doesn't have the foggiest notion
whether or not ABC got that story 15 minutes
before NBC. We don't usually watch three sta-
tions at the same time...We don't
know...--------Dick

To hype up their ratings. Because whoever can
give you who has won, they're going to win on
their ratings chart for that week. And, I think
they're trying to be the first one. CBS is try-
ing to beat NBC and we were talking at
work...maybe, if they just put it as one show and
maybe wouldn't have all
this...--------Cynthia
REPORTERS' SPECULATIONS AND EARLY PROJECTIONS

What appeared to be a fairly straightforward research question, the individual's ability to differentiate between a journalist's own speculations about the election outcome from the statistically-based early projections, provided some fascinating insights into the ways in which the public perceives these two, supposedly different, types of information.

Most participants perceived no real differences between the two sources of information. They believed that since these speculations were made by professional journalists, their opinions must be based on outside, independent information. They speculated that this information was made available to the journalist, and correctly interpreted by him, because of his position (veteran, experienced reporter) and location (being in the newsroom). It would be fair to say that most believed that the journalistic speculations rested upon some empirical data. Although not explicitly stated, it seemed that the data referred to were the results of the network's own exit polls. As these comments suggest, a reporter's speculation only looks and sounds different when compared to the sterile, impersonal numbers on the board.

I think when people hear commentaries, they don't think it's a commentary. They think they're reporting something.-------Mark
You got a lot of general public who idolized somebody like Walter Cronkite. You got a lot of people that swear by him. "That man don't lie. He tells the absolute truth. He's on top of it. He knows what to do."------George

To me when they're doing that (speculating) you kind of wonder where are they getting this information from. So, to me he must have some reasons to back that up. So, to me it's about the same.------Cynthia

He's there. He's in New York. He must know. He's on location.------Dianel

What is he basing his observations on? I mean, he's not getting up there and saying Hart is going to win. There must be some basis, and I'm just assuming that if I'm watching it. I would say I'd pay more attention to the numbers, but I'm assuming that Howard K. Smith or someone like that is definitely not going to say something off the top of his head. I would take it seriously.------Kathy

UNDERSTANDING OF THE METHODS EMPLOYED

Reported below are the comments made by some of the female participants as to how the networks are able to make these early projections. Male responses are not presented, and the reason for that is, in itself, a finding. Without actually posing the question, "How do you think networks are able to make these early projections?", some male participants inadvertently answered the question in their general comments and remarks about contemporary politics and polling. Female group members, however, appeared to be less technically sophisticated and didn't indicate any real substantial knowledge with regard to polling techniques and
statistically-based projections. This is probably due to the fact that the male participants, overall, were better educated than the females and a number of the males were employed in professions and occupations where they were exposed to and/or utilized statistics and theories of probability. As is evident from these comments, only a handful of the women any understanding of the principles of exit polling and early projections:

They run polls and they have percentages and I think I remember them mentioning a margin of error.--------Leslie

I think it's a random sample and they have pollsters asking people when they come out, who they voted for.--------Pat

Mathematical. Through computer analysis or something. Mathematical formula...--------Dianel

They go to voting places and ask them.--------Christine

Mr. Harris and Mr. Gallup.--------Sally

Probably computers.--------Bea

Don't they just take a percentage of the votes they already have? If you maybe take the north-end maybe because they counted their votes up, but you don't have the southend people. So they take a percentage of that and just run it through.--------Cynthia

Every district, they have so much information from previous years, that they're able to get a pretty accurate idea.--------Mary
CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTIVES' MAIL SURVEYS

Participants were asked about the questionnaires that are mailed to them by their Congressional Representative. Their comments were directed at the questionnaire form that most registered voters receive in the mail, are asked to fill out and then return. The results of such surveys were not made available to the participants, hence their comments pertained to the blank survey protocol. As reported in Chapter 3, most identified a number of problems inherent in this type of polling procedure. Unrepresentative samples, lack of demographics, skewed responses, unreported margin of error, and biased questions were some of the problems mentioned which led most to conclude that such surveys were not bona fide public opinion polls. It must be noted however, that a couple of group members thought the polls were legitimate and scientific, representing the views of the particular Representative's constituents. As their comments illustrate:

The other thing you have to know is who did he send it to?--------Roger

Every household in the district.--------Group leader

That's a lot closer to the scientific, it has a scientific basis.--------Roger

Although the questions cover a broad area, your answers are narrowed: Do you agree or disagree....It's the constituents input.--------Pat.
These remarks are not representative of the majority's highly critical evaluation of the Congressional poll. In fact, as stated in the previous chapter, participants were generally unrelenting in their negative evaluation of this type of poll -- often not addressing the particular poll at hand, but referring to the biased nature of "all of these types of poll." It is important to note that this particular questionnaire was fairly constructed, that is, the questions were devoid of highly emotional keywords and blatant biases that have come to be associated with these politically motivated surveys. Sampling and other methodological questions aside, one would have to look long and hard in order to find disparaging evidence. As previously explicated, it appeared that some group members had cognitive schemas for this sort of stimuli and they reflexively invoked the appropriate script without carefully scrutinizing the particular item under consideration.

The attack on the poll's methodology which in turn tarnished the poll's credibility did not lead to an outright rejection or dismissal of these types of polls. Surprisingly, most of the critical group members also identified some redeeming functions of this poll type. Not only did these mail surveys benefit the Congress member, but they were also thought to be of some positive utility to the citizenry.
Participants mentioned a number of ways in which the poll results might be utilized by the Representative. A few thought the surveys represented a genuine effort on the part of the Representative to measure his/her's constituents policy preferences. The following conversation illustrates this belief:

I think that he probably uses it probably not as the bottom line of decision making but I bet you he uses it though to see what his people in his district are thinking about....It serves feedback purposes.-------Roger

I think he gets plenty of feedback.-------Russ

He's trying to improve his feedback. I think what he's doing here is a good idea. We're more apt to fill this out, the questions are easy to read and you may or may not have an opinion on it, but more than likely you're going to, or at least it will get you thinking about it. He's going to get more feedback, uninitiated without us sitting down and writing a letter...So, I feel it serves a good purpose.-------Robert

I would just say that I think it's possible that some of these are honest attempts to sense the environment. I can't be completely cynical. I would think that somebody who does this in good faith clearly wishes to hear....-------John

Others were not as generous in their accounts of how such information might be utilized by the Congressional Representative. As one member commented, "these polls are used to the advantage of politicians versus the people." Unlike their cohorts who believed the results would be utilized in an altruistic manner, some participants, apparent-
ly believers in real politiks, thought the surveys benefited the politician in two important ways. First, the questionnaire mailed to the constituent's home was perceived to be another form of campaign literature, a reminder to the constituent that the representative is working to represent their views in Washington.

This is good to keep his name in front of you.--------Unidentified

I don't have any faith in it. To me that's just somebody out there who's fighting to get reelected.--------Bob

Besides the advantages of the poll for reelection purposes, it was also believed that the representative might use the survey results selectively, reporting those responses which are in support of the representative's policy stands.

There's bias in the wording of the question, there's bias in the way it would be interpreted and used when it comes back because I guarantee you these things are going to be reported. "Here's what most people say, So and So is doing a good job because he's going to do this, this, and this". It's very selective in the reporting of the results.--------Ken

Somewhat related is the criticism that those who are most likely to respond to polls of this sort are those constituents who are in basic agreement and supportive of the representative. Yet, one group member argued that feedback from that particular segment of the representative's constituency was extremely important. The opinions of those who are relatively politically active and concerned, enough so to
complete and return the survey, are opinions that the representative should be cognizant of.

Then again, the people who send it back in are the people who care and the people who....pretty valuable to know.-------Dawn.

UTILITY OF REPRESENTATIVE'S POLL - THE INDIVIDUAL

An overwhelming majority, although highly critical of the methods employed and skeptical of the generalizability of the results, thought the surveys served an important communicatory function. The will of the people is communicated to those who govern. The most common response to the poll was that "It's better than nothing." After presenting a myriad of reasons why such polls are invalid and non-representative most opined that they were glad Congress members send out the questionnaires. They commented:

I'm glad he does it and those who want to throw it away fine, and those who want to send it back, fine. What I'm impressed about is, I get the impression...this man does make some attempt to communicate to his people....-------Robert

As this following conversation suggests:

I'd like to defend this a bit, if I may. I think that the point you're making is true, it's not a random sample of people. It's extremely difficult to get a random sample of people. If you use telephones, there are people who don't have them or people who work or people who are on night shift or who knows what will make it very difficult to get information. I think it's better for Congresspeople to ask than not to ask. For example, look at question #7. I don't know if you consider that biased or not? It's saying, in your view "What are the most important national problems" and you can check something and it includes, "other". That is not necessarily ter-
riably biased. It may not be representative of the district but... it's highly unlikely that Wylie or any other Congressman has the staff to be able to make a telephone or door-to-door survey. They just can't do that. So as opposed to anything else, I think it's better. It may be an inadequate poll, but it's better than anything else.-------Dick

I agree with Dick. It's better than Wylie sitting in Washington who doesn't know how his voters back in Columbus, how they're feeling. I think that sending out something like this is good to get their opinions but it can be biased, and it is going to be.-------Steve2

One participant believed the poll was a vehicle by which she could communicate opinions that were in opposition to the majority's opinion. As she stated:

I'm always a minority. I wanted Wylie to know that there are some people out there who don't agree with him...It's the only way I have to communicate with Wylie because I don't write him letters, I don't call him up.-------Leslie.

Such polls then serve a positive function in that they present the citizen with an opportunity to participate, giving rise to feelings of political efficacy. Their opinions were sought and possibly utilized by the representative in policy decisions. So, according to the perceptions and opinions of many of the group members, it behooves Representatives to continue this exchange, no matter how the results are treated (or mistreated). Symbolically, the benefits for the representative are enormous, not to mention the material rewards vis-a-vis campaign strategy.
CONCLUSION

Political polls, in general, and exit polls specifically were thought to exert an undue amount of influence on elections and the electorate. Scenarios were described where voters, candidates, campaigns, and society, as a whole, more often than not, suffered from the negative consequences of telecast political polls. It was argued by many that the impact of political polls on the individual, and subsequently on society, was definitely related to some basic personality defects of the common citizen. The average man/woman was perceived as being ignorant, lazy, uninformed, and apathetic. Participants often made remarks distancing themselves from the public they had described. They were more interested, informed, and too intelligent to base such important decisions on something as superficial and ephemeral as a political poll. Perhaps they were correct in their assessment of the public and of themselves. However, the correctness of their perceptions is not the issue. What is at issue are their beliefs that polls are negatively influencing the citizenry and the democratic processes.

It is important to note a condition under which the 'thinking' public might be influenced by poll results. When asked about the affect of the networks' early projections on the electorate, many participants believed that
such information might result in what was referred to as the "stay-at-home" effect. Why waste one's time and energy if your preferred candidate has already been declared the victor, or the loser? Your vote won't count. This argument seems reasonable and quite rational. What does this portend for the models of rational voting that have assumed decision making in a context of risk or uncertainty? Pollsters are now able to predict election outcomes, weeks, if not days, before the actual election. This information must surely enter into the individual's calculus as to whether or not one should expend his/her resources and vote. The participants' comments certainly suggest that this electoral information is considered. Perhaps future research should acknowledge the existence of such important information, attempting to see how it affects the various rationality based models of voting behavior.

Although an overwhelming majority of the participants were critical of political polls, suggesting that they are more detrimental than helpful, a few did mention some positive uses of such poll information. As was reported, political polls were thought to serve some positive functions. First, candidate preference polls were thought to provide some individuals with needed guidance, reducing the cognitive stress created by an overabundance of information (in this case, information about the numerous contenders
for the Democratic nomination). Apparently, political candidate polls narrow the field and help the individual to focus on a smaller set of stimuli. This speaks to Lippmann's (1922) belief that individuals need to be cognitive misers, to "economize" all the information they're presented with. Polls, at least, provide some structure and present the individual with a starting point in the decision making process. It was believed that this function was especially important to those who had not yet decided which candidate to support.

Another function of political polls was mentioned, but only by a couple of group members. They found candidate preference polls, including the early projections, to be entertaining. This certainly was a minority position.

Some alluded to a third function polls might serve, where polls are used as a communication tool. Polls communicate to the individual about others in society, and polls communicate to leaders and policy-makers. Some reported that the demographic information reported along with some political polls enabled them to compare their behavior or opinions with members of their secondary reference groups. The importance of this function should not be understated. Voting behavior studies have indicated that the influence of primary and secondary groups on one's behavior is quite important.
A few alluded to the 'spiraling' affect polls might have on the formation of public opinion. As they had described it, publicized poll results have a tendency to build upon themselves. People wanting (or needing) to conform with the majority opinion will adopt the positions of the reported majority, as indicated by public opinion polls, increasing the number of those adhering to this particular position. This description coincides with Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1977) theory of opinion formation, referred to as the "Spiral of Silence", Noelle-Neumann states:

As social beings, most people are afraid of becoming isolated from their environment. They would like to be popular and respected. In order to avoid becoming isolated and in order not to lose popularity and esteem, people constantly observe their environment very closely. They try to find out what opinions and modes of behavior are prevalent, and which opinions and modes are becoming more popular. They behave and express themselves accordingly in public (p., 144).

As to how many individuals are driven by this powerful need to conform, that is open to speculation. In fact, Noelle-Neumann's theories about opinion formation have been criticized on this count. Yet, we need to acknowledge the possibility that, for some, this need to conform might be real (probably evident in varying degrees) with polls being attended to in order to seek out information about the majority. In fact, Graber (1984), in her recent study of the processing of political information, reported that:

The widespread interest in knowing what the public approves or condemns is also reflected in
avid attention to stories reporting public opinion poll results (p,167).

For whatever reasons, whether propelled by the need to see where others like themselves stand, or just out of plain curiosity, it appears that polls do serve some important surveillance and information seeking functions for individuals.

Network political polls, at least those which are issue-focused rather than candidate preference polls, also serve a communicatory function. As was pointed out by some participants, these polls communicate the concerns and policy preference of the public to our leaders. It was argued that the media, in providing the means by which to communicate public opinion, speak for us, instead of their usual speaking to us.

This was also the case with the Congressional polls. Scathing attacks on the methodology and construction of the mail polls did not detract from the positive function served by these polls. Constituents, via the mail survey, have an opportunity to communicate with their Representative. Interestingly, only a couple of group members focused on the actual use of such information in a decision making context, yet most all believed that the Representative was making an honest attempt to gauge his/her's constituents opinions and policy preferences. The symbolic significance of this communication should not be underesti-
mated if participants' perceptions are any indication of public sentiment. Political polls, in these contexts, were viewed as serving positive functions.

Besides, exerting influence on voters and others in society, political polls were believed to be of great importance to candidates and their campaigns. As reported, many believed that political polls have changed campaign politics, in a negative way. Some likened political polls to product market research, with polls aiding in the packaging and selling of the candidates. It was also pointed out, that polls might inform a candidate of his/her chances of electoral success, possibly resulting in a candidate's reevaluation and withdrawal from the race. Some believed that results from the Congressional surveys would be manipulated so that the results reported would provide evidence of public support for the Representative's positions. It was also believed that such surveys serve the incumbent Congress member well, reminding the constituent that their representative is doing his/her job, not to mention the need to 'refresh' the memories of some folks who might have 'forgotten' their representative's name.

The networks did not fare well in all of this. They were perceived, for the most part, as being self-serving in their polling activities. Early projections by television networks before all polls have closed nationwide is a prac-
tice many would like to see halted. Such election night projections are perceived as being of no service to the public and are believed to have a detrimental effect on the electoral process. Most believed the networks engaged in this activity hoping to boost their ratings. Early projections based on statistically based poll results were basically indistinguishable from network journalists' speculations; with the only perceived difference being one of reporting style. The networks were castigated not only for their conducting and broadcasting of early election projections, but also for their other campaign related polling activities. It was believed that the networks are creating, or manufacturing news through their polling activities. Some suggested the networks be more responsible in the reporting of political polls, pointing out some of the limitations of the data being reported to the public. This research has raised a number of important questions, some of which are ripe for further research. The concluding chapter, which follows, will address that issue, recommending a research agenda which is an outgrowth of this research project.
Chapter VI
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the role of public opinion polls in contemporary American society. Virtually nothing is known about the public's perceptions, understanding and utilization of public opinion polls, and much of the previous research has been based on a number of assumptions concerning individuals' understanding and utilization of poll data. One of the major goals of this study was to address some of those assumptions, to assess how much people know about polls and polling techniques and how they might incorporate such information in their everyday lives.

The next section will list the major findings of the study followed by a discussion of what the findings suggest about the relationship between the individual and polls; the politician and polls; pollsters and polling; and most importantly about the role of polls in a democratic society. After addressing these issues, the chapter will conclude with a brief discussion about future research questions.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. Only a small subset of the participants possessed the knowledge and expertise to critically evaluate public opinion polls. They brought up the sampling procedures, size of the sample, question wording, poll sponsor, and other methodological issues.

2. The less technically sophisticated participants often touched upon some of the more theoretically interesting and problematic issues of public opinion polling such as opinion stability and fluidity; the distinction between public and consumer issues; the intended purpose of polls; the relationship between opinions and behavior; and the impact of presentation style of poll results.

3. Theories of cognitive dissonance apply to the evaluation of the credibility of the polls. Polls that provided the individual with information that was consonant with their existing beliefs were viewed as being more credible than poll results which were incongruent with their opinions. Discrediting the poll was one way of reducing cognitive stress without having to alter one's opinion.

4. Participation in a survey was a factor related to poll credibility. Those who had previously participated were left with negative impressions about the practice
of polling, condemning their own behavior as a respondent or the behavior of the pollsters. Most had never been involved in a survey and therefore questioned the representativeness of public opinion polls.

5. The uses and gratifications approach, which has been successfully applied to the study of media use and effects, was also found to be an appropriate framework for the study of poll use and effects. Participants alluded to various reasons why they pay attention to polls and the different ways in which they might utilize reported poll results. Public opinion polls serve as a form of entertainment for some, diversion for others, and often provide needed information and guidance. This was especially the case for political polls, which were thought to serve three positive functions. Candidate preference polls were thought to provide individuals with needed guidance in their vote decision, reducing the cognitive stress created by an abundance of information about the numerous contenders for such races as the 1984 Democratic Presidential nomination. This function was most important for those who had not yet decided which candidate to support. Polls were also thought to serve another positive function in that they are a communication tool. Polls communicate to the individual about others in
society, and polls communicate to leaders and policymakers about the preferences of the public. For some, polls were entertaining: it was fun to hear or read about what others in the community (immediate or extended) favored or opposed.

6. Participants indicated that the credibility of the poll was not always of paramount importance. The information contained in a poll might be utilized regardless of the poll's perceived credibility. Some described computing (informally of course) a cost calculus of sorts, asking themselves what was the cost of following the public's opinion? Low cost consequences meant a greater likelihood of utilizing the information if it fulfilled a need, and some also considered the cost of not acting on the poll information.

7. Comparisons of source preference suggested that, for many, expert opinion was preferred over mass opinion. Poll information fared rather poorly when compared to other sources of information that one might choose to support one's argument.

8. Polls were believed to be influential. Participants identified one group in particular who were vulnerable to the influence of public opinion polls: the unthinking public. Those not willing to expend the necessary time and energy to seek out information on the press-
ing issues of the day (or any issues, for that matter) will find poll results an attractive commodity. The information is usually presented in a way that is easy to interpret and process.

9. Polls will exert some influence upon those who are undecided on an issue or political candidate, especially in situations where the individual is interested yet is being bombarded with a tremendous number of stimuli.

10. Besides influencing the individual's vote decision or position on a political issue, polls were thought to exert a fair amount of influence on political campaigns. Such information was thought to have had a negative impact on campaign politics, with polls aiding in the packaging and selling of the politician.

11. The networks were castigated for their role in this process. Exit polling and the early election night projections were perceived to be a detrimental interference in the democratic process of voting. It was believed that many would be affected by the early projections, the result being a lower voter turnout. For those who hadn't yet cast their vote, it would be an irrational act to expend the time and energy required to vote in an election that had already been decided.
12. The networks were perceived as being self-serving in their polling activities. Most believed the networks engaged in the early projections hoping to boost their ratings.

The following discussion suggests some serious implications of these findings.

IMPLICATIONS

Without doubt poll information is being utilized by the public. This study has described a number of conditions under which the individual might find poll information useful. If such information is utilized, then the poll is having some impact on the individual's opinions and/or behavior. But, as indicated by the findings, the relationship between polls and the public is not as direct, or as simple as many have believed it to be. Lang and Lang (1984) have argued that there is a need to redefine "public opinion." In arguing for the study of indirect poll effects, they stated:

The term "public opinion" stands not just for what people as individuals think but for something objective to which they react (p.138).

According to the perceptions and the experiences of the subjects of this study, the public is definitely reacting to publicized public opinion polls. Although they did not use the jargon of social scientists, the group members did
allude to a number of sociological and psychological conditions and needs of individuals in post-industrial society.

As described in the previous chapters, individuals have a need to know how others in their community (defined as either immediate or extended) think and behave. Noelle-Neumann's (1974,1977) theory of public opinion formation suggests that individuals are fearful of social isolation and have a vested interest in acquiring information about the prevailing opinion in their community. The logic of this is that if one is in step with majority opinion (or conceals her adherence to the minority position) there is less likelihood of social ostracism. Modern society has seen a decline in the number of personal contacts among members of a community. However, our need to know about the prevailing opinion has not diminished (Noelle-Neumann, 1974,1977). Less contact between members of society means fewer opportunities for one to acquire first hand information about the climate of opinion. Thus much of our information about others must come to us from mediated sources. Public opinion polls, as this study has found, provide the individual with some of this needed information.

Poll information serves another important function. Participants' descriptions of the possible uses of poll information provide empirical evidence supporting the arguments of Lippmann (1922) and (more recently) Graber (1984),
who attempt to explain the processing of political or public affairs information by the individual. Both described an important psychological factor: the drive toward cognitive economy. The individual is bombarded with information and must find ways of coping with the resultant cognitive stress. For Lippmann, this provided the psychological rationale for the individual's development of and attachment to stereotypes, and for Graber it helped explain why some information is assimilated while other stimuli are ignored. If Lippmann, Graber, and others are correct in that individuals must be cognitive misers, that is, learn to deal with the abundance of stimuli in an cognitively efficient manner, polls might have an important role to play. And, as the participants have indicated, polls do help them structure what is, at times, a fairly complex political world.

Thus, we have a public that is fairly ignorant about proper polling techniques; yet, at the same time, evidence suggests the information provided by public opinion polls is of value to the individual. The public needs the information presented in polls, although few are able to discriminate between the scientific and non-scientific poll. For many, all poll data is treated alike, regardless of its validity. Polls are being attended to and the information is being utilized in the development of opinions.
In recent years we have experienced enormous growth in the polling sector, both public and private. If it were the case that all poll information disseminated to the public was valid and reliable then there might be less cause for concern. However, not all of the publicized polls follow the precepts of the scientific method. The American Association for Public Opinion Research, in an attempt to set standards for pollsters and to educate journalists about proper polling methods, adopted a code of standards in 1969. Eight guidelines were to be followed by all pollsters releasing survey results. Miller and Hurd (1982) examined newspapers' conformity to AAPOR's standards and found a rather low level of compliance:

Analysis of 116 polls published in the period of 1972-1979 indicates a dramatic increase in the number of polls reported but not in the level of conformity to AAPOR standards (p. 243).

It is highly unlikely that there will be an enforcement of the AAPOR guidelines. Instead, voluntary compliance has been urged by AAPOR.(7)

Polls conducted by political organizations, some with definite ideological axes to grind, are being presented in the media as legitimate, valid measures of public opinion.

(7) President's address in AAPOR Newsletter, Spring 1985.

(8) Terry Dolan, head of the National Conservative Political Action Committee has started his own polling organization. He sees his mission as being one of providing the public with unbiased public opinion information, a counter to the "left-wing radical" polls conducted by the networks, newspapers, Gallup, Harris, etc. His
The unsuspecting public is vulnerable. Rather than acquiring accurate information about the public (or specific groups) they might be acquiring incorrect information upon which they base their opinions and possibly their actions. The implications for this in a democratic society are quite disconcerting and will be discussed at length. However, as reported in the summary of findings, there are some conditional limitations impinging on the relationship between the individual and polls. These too will be discussed.

THE ROLE OF POLLS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

One essential feature that distinguishes democracies from other regime types is the role given to the will of the people. Representatives and governmental leaders are to derive their powers from the consent of those they govern. Debates have raged as to the extent and the form of citizen input in our democratic nation. Those debates aside, suffice it to say that public opinion has had and will continue to have an influential role in the formulation and/or validation of social and political policy decisions.

Polls have been published in a number of newspapers and have all the trappings of a legitimate, valid, scientific poll. However, if one studies the questions asked, it becomes quite evident that the question wording is biased, violating one of the principles of scientific polling.

As stated in the Declaration of Independence, "Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."
Prior to the 1940's few were engaged in the measurement of the public's opinions. Policy makers and other politicians had to depend upon other sources to inform them of the climate of opinion. It was usually the case that opinion leaders and other influentials were active in communicating the "will of the people" (at least their interpretation of it) to the relevant decision makers. Key (1964), while acknowledging the existence of survey research techniques, downplayed the role of opinion polls in this process. As he saw it:

Despite their power as instruments for the observation of mass opinion, sampling procedures do not bring within their range elements of the political system basic for the understanding of the role of mass opinion within the system....The data tell us almost nothing about the dynamic relations between the upper layer of activists and mass opinion (p.,536).

For Key and others, political activists and other elites played a fundamental role in the processes of opinion formation and communication. What would Key make of today's situation? One can only wonder. Many changes have occurred since his seminal work on the role of public opinion in our democratic system of government. With the tremendous rise in the number of Independent voters and the decline of the political parties, party activists have lost much of their support and hence their authority to speak for the masses or to the masses. The number of political influentials has
dwindled while the number of public opinion pollsters has greatly risen.

Do policy makers and elected officials still rely primarily upon the insights of the elites and influentials regarding the opinions of the masses? I think not. With questions of ease and accuracy in mind, those in need of information about the public sentiment would do best to seek out the latest opinion poll. (Unfortunately, there is little research to date concerning elected officials', in particular Congress members', reliance or attentiveness to polls).

Not only are Congress members likely consumers of public opinion polls, but so are modern Presidents. As Beal and Hinckley (1984) stated in their description of the Reagan White House's reliance on public opinion polls:

Regardless of their use, opinion polls are at the core of presidential decision making....It may be possible to overstate the role and value of opinion polls in presidential decision-making. However, for the modern presidency, the more likely error is to underestimate the availability, influence, and salience of opinion polls on the president and his key advisers (p. 74).

There is little need to speak at great length of the role of public opinion polls in political campaigns. Professional and lay observers alike bemoan the dominance of public opinion polls in electoral politics. The public is inundated with polls reporting candidate preference, the public's perceived saliency of and position on current
issues, and results of hypothetical head-to-head candidate races. On election day, exit polls even predict the winner, this having a purported effect on voter turnout. We have a situation where politicians, elected officials, political candidates, and others look to public opinion polls for guidance. Margolis (19??), in a recent article titled, "Public Opinion, Polling, and Political Behavior" expressed some important concerns about the nature and accuracy of public opinion as represented in frequently conducted polls:

The new found ability to link mass opinion to public policy decisions nonetheless raised three serious questions. First, were the masses equipped to consider complex problems, however carefully posed by public opinion pollsters? Second, even if the masses were able to understand the problems, would they be willing to give their true opinions, those which would be predictive of subsequent behavior? Finally, even if the first two conditions were satisfied, would representatives have the obligation to enact policies in accordance with popular opinions? (p.,63).

All three questions posed by Margolis are of great importance; however, for the purposes of this discussion only the first two questions will be addressed. In answer to the first question, study after study has indicated that the mass public is generally uninformed about many of the pressing issues of the day. This is especially the case if the issue at hand is not salient to the individual. Yet, most pollsters ask closed-ended questions, providing the
respondent with a number of simple answers from which to choose from. Too few surveys measure the saliency of an issue and virtually none of the non-academic surveys measure the information level of the respondent. (10) Experiments have also shown that some members of the public won't readily admit that they are not knowledgable about a particular topic and will express an opinion, if asked. Not having to elaborate upon one's answer, having just to utter a "yes" or "no", "approve" or "disapprove" makes this kind of 'cheating' inviting. (11) There are a number of other problems associated with the measurement of opinion which have lead some scholars to conclude that essentially, what is being measured and reported on are not opinions which are an outgrowth of discussion and deliberation, but

(10) A recent New York Times/ CBS News poll proves an exception to this. After asking respondents whether or not they support the Administration's policy in Central America, interviewees were asked additional questions in an attempt to measure the amount of specific knowledge they had about the region and its politics. Of those who offered opinions on U.S. policy in Central America, only 26% could correctly identify which side the U.S. supported in the Nicaraguan and El Salvadoran conflicts. This was a 7% increase over the previous year when only 19% of those who stated opinions were able to correctly identify whose side the U.S. was on.

(11) Two surveys were conducted, one in 1978, the other in 1979, which asked respondents to state whether they favored or opposed the passage of the Agricultural Trade Act or the Money Control Bill. These two pieces of legislation received no public attention and were not reported on in the media. Yet, 31% in 1978 and 26% in 1979 expressed opinions about these bills (Lang and Lang, 1984).
rather are superficial pseudo-opinions. Practitioners and students of public opinion are well aware of these and other methodological problems which confound our ability to tap into the public's thinking.

Very much related to these problems are Lippmann's (1922) concerns about the concept of a single, monolithic Public Opinion. According to Lippmann, one's opinions are an outgrowth of one's personal experiences and perceptions of the world, with each individual operating from a unique experiential and perceptual base. Lippmann argued that because of these variations among the populus the formation of a true Public Opinion was impossible. These psychological, perceptual and experiential variations further confound the problem of obtaining accurate measures of the public's opinions.

As far as Margolis' second question, research has found that respondents might not express their honest opinions out of fear that their opinions might be viewed as socially unacceptable. With proper design and execution some of these problems can be reduced, but never entirely eliminated. The current state of the art is such that there are some error-producing factors over which the pollster has very little control. As far as the second part of the question is concerned, whether opinion is predictive of behavior, Margolis answers his own query. He states:
Despite recent increases in strength, however, the direct link between positions expressed on current issues and subsequent voting behavior—let alone other subsequent political behaviors—remains generally weaker than that between party affiliation and the vote....That they represent valid expressions of a general will of the people is extremely doubtful (p.,65).

The most serious consequence of all this is the cycle that has developed. Politicians, policy makers, elected official, and citizens all rely on poll information (of course this is dependent upon their specific needs at specific times). They need to know, for whatever purposes, the public's opinion. Yet, there are numerous problems associated with opinion measurement. One must be aware of the limitations of the state of the art of polling as well as the subtleties involved in opinion measurement. This study suggests that many members of the public are not sufficiently knowledgeable about proper polling techniques. One can

A situation exists where people are utilizing the information presented in polls in ways that satisfy their particular needs. Yet, it doesn't stop there. Opinion formation is an on-going process. As Noelle-Neumann's (1974,1977) theory, the spiral of silence, describes it, the perception of current public opinion effects the future formation of opinion on a particular issue. Those holding what they perceive to be the minority position, may gradually become silent. The new opinion becomes the dominant
opinion, even though there might not be a majority adhering to that position. In that case, public opinion, or the perception of the public's position, feeds into the formation of a new Public Opinion.

Something akin to this might be occurring in our democratic society. Poll information is utilized, without the knowledge or understanding that it is a superficial and sometimes crude depiction of public opinion at that particular moment in time. The information gleaned from polls is used to form one's own opinion on an issue or to influence one's behavior. These newly formed opinions and poll-influenced behaviors then constitute or affect (through action) current public opinion.

If one agrees with Lippmann's argument that there can never be a monolithic Public Opinion and also takes into consideration the other problems associated with opinion measurement, then the situation becomes quite alarming. We have citizens, elected officials and other members of a democratic society, all basing their opinions, policy decisions, and policy related behavior on potentially inaccurate, superficial, and misleading information about the Public's Opinion. Polls exert tremendous influence over the electorate, non-voters, politicians, journalists, and elected officials. One has the feeling that many important decisions are made more on the basis of poll data than
expert opinion or even good old-fashioned intuition. In democratic societies, decisions are supposed to be the product of reasoned discussions and debates, the free exchange of ideas, and of compromise. If individuals because of certain social factors (they are atomistic, and isolated) and psychological needs (conformity, reduction of cognitive stress/dissonance) come to rely on polls to the exclusion of discussions with others in the community, this does not bode well for the concept of citizen participation as an integral component of democratic regimes.

Adding to this dilemma is that fact that polls seem to have acquired a sense of legitimacy and authority in modern society: "Numbers don't lie." The Langs have voiced concern over this:

> the more intriguing poll effects stem from the way people in general use information about the distribution of opinion when making up their minds on how to act. What will happen when these polls come to share the kind of scientific authority now reserved for such indicators of the nation's economic health as employment, money supply, the Dow-Jones index, and consumer intentions? People pay close attention to these indicators when it comes to deciding what to do with their money or how to dispose of resources they control. Can the continuous tracking of basic attitudes toward sexual and racial discrimination or toward nuclear arms freezes or the idea of national service, by affecting the climate of opinion, influence the individual attitudes being monitored? (p.,142).

My position is that polls do influence individual attitudes and behavior. However, as the findings of this study sug-
gest this is a complex issue, with many conditions, qualifications, and exceptions. The following section will speak to those factors that either enhance or mitigate the potential effects of polls.

CONDITIONS MITIGATING OR ENHANCING POLL INFLUENCE

As the findings suggest, certain factors either inhibit or enhance the effects of polls on the individual. Some psychological and sociological variables appear to play an important role in this process. Research on information acquisition has indicated that the two most important factors in this activity are the accessibility and perceived credibility of the information source. The question of poll credibility was addressed in the discussion groups. Participants' reactions to the question of poll credibility were certainly in line with the psychological theories of cognitive dissonance and consonance. The individual, striving for a minimal level of cognitive stress, can limit the impact of the poll data by deeming the information invalid and not credible. And, the individual might be willing to accept the results of a questionable poll if the data conforms with his or her already held opinion.

It was also found that the potential influence of polls is related to the various social and psychological needs of the individual. The uses and gratifications framework which has been applied to the study of media use and
effects provided much insight into the utilization and, hence, influence of public opinion polls. Group members indicated that the attention paid to polls and the utilization of the reported data was definitely related to the individual's social and psychological needs at a particular time. For the individual who had not yet decided whom to vote for in the Democratic primary race, polls reporting on the contenders popularity provided needed information that would influence his/her vote choice. Whereas for another individual who had already decided, such information might help in the development of self or might serve an entertainment function. For others, the reported poll might be altogether ignored, thereby exerting no influence on vote choice. As with other mediated messages, publicized poll information is being received and interpreted by psychologically active audience members, their psychological predispositions mitigating or enhancing the effect of the message. Poll influence is dependent upon these variables making the detection of poll effects on the aggregate level extremely difficult.

The findings suggest that for some, expert opinion was preferred over poll information. Reasons for this preference were presented and are quite reasonable and valid. This is another factor that might mitigate the potential influence of poll data upon the individual. Besides more
weight being given to the opinions of experts, political columnists, and other social and entertainment critics, some group members viewed polls, particularly the political ones, as being an intrusion in the democratic process. High levels of resentment were detectable. Blame was placed on the news organizations and the politicians for their role in what was perceived to be the perversion of the electoral process. Too much weight was given to poll results, thus polls, to a great extent, controlled the campaigns and the candidates.

Those who had participated in surveys were critical of polling efforts as were those who had never participated. Some were baffled as to why they had never been called; since they felt this, this cast some doubt on the scientific nature of public opinion polls. These negative feelings towards polls might, in some cases, act as a mitigating factor.

As is evident from this study, there is much work that needs to be accomplished in the area of public opinion, polls and their influence. The next section will briefly describe some topics that are worthy of investigation.
FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has raised a number of important questions, some of which are ripe for further research. As far as the effect of political polls on the public, participants continually suggested that others, not themselves, were subject to the influence of political polls. These others were described as being less educated, less informed, and quite apathetic. This warrants further investigation. Are those who are politically apathetic more likely to be influenced? Do they pay attention to political news stories reporting poll results? Is such information included in their cognitive map of the political world? What about the more educated, more informed citizens? Would individuals classified as "news junkies", exhibiting a high degree of interest in public affairs behaviorally realized by above average media use, be influenced by political polls? These individuals regularly read newspapers and newsmagazines and watch public affairs programs. Due to their relatively high exposure level to political news and information, one would expect high exposure to political polls. Do they pay attention to these political polls? If so, how might they be influenced by these polls?

Other personality characteristics need to be included in research on the individual and poll influence. Psychologi-
cal variables such as degree of conformity, and social variables such as opinion leadership and social integration are important independent variables that should be considered. One might expect that those who are more conformist in nature would pay more attention to public opinion polls, polls providing them with needed information about the majority position. Opinion leaders, whether self-identified or based on reputational data, might also utilize poll findings, although I suspect for different reasons. Individuals who are not highly integrated into the social system might use polls, and the information provided, as a link to the outside world. Polls might serve to "break" their social isolation and help the individual feel connected to the community. These and other social-psychological variables should be researched in order to better understand how political polls, and public opinion polls in general, are affecting individuals and society.

The use of political polls by elected officials, candidates and campaign staffs would make a fascinating research project. A first hand account of the operations of a political campaign focusing on the role of public opinion polls would provide invaluable data. Somewhat related is research on network polling activities. How are decisions made within the organization; from the network's vice-president of News to the director of the polling division?
What internal and external factors impinge on this particular activity of news making and reporting? What are reporters' feelings with regard to political polling and the emphasis placed on this information during the campaign? How much do those who are disseminating this information to the public understand about the techniques and problems of public opinion measurement? Are they relatively sophisticated or disappointingly naive? For scholars interested in political communication and opinion formation, these are just a few of many questions waiting to be addressed. The numerous contenders for the Democratic Presidential nomination.
Appendix A

POLLS DISCUSSED IN FOCUS GROUPS

VOICES FROM ACROSS THE USA

/Is the U.S. military capable, competent and ready for combat?

LONNIE MURRAY, 47
Vice president of finance
Washington, D.C.

We're not ready for combat because we're not focusing on educating the young, bright potential scientists in this country. There was no excuse for the equipment failure during the Iranian rescue mission or for our fiasco in Grenada. We don't strive for perfection anymore. And that will contribute to our ultimate doom.

BARBARA BURGES, 47
Office employee
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

No one can ignore the fact that we're spending a lot of money on defense, but does that necessarily mean we're prepared for war? I don't think so. I'm not prepared to say that just because we've spent billions on defense that we're prepared. I certainly hope we are, though. I have a son in the service. I don't want to lose him.

THOMAS ORISWELL, 45
Barber
Fairfax, Wash.

I honestly believe that we're well-prepared for combat, and our experience in Grenada is a good example. It showed that we're capable of successful missions. I don't care what people say about not being prepared. We are, and we're not spending too much on defense. Defense and freedom come at a very high price.

SUSAN MCMAHON, 33
Public relations manager
Greensboro, N.C.

We spend a lot of money on defense, but we don't spend it efficiently. For that reason, I don't think we're prepared for military combat. It concerns me, of course, but I don't want to say it makes me nervous. We need to re-evaluate how this money is spent. Once we do, we can train our personnel more efficiently.

JULIE GILLOT, 21
Salesperson
Cleveland, Ohio

Our weapons are ready, but our leaders are confused. They're trying to pull the wool over our eyes by not giving us all of the details about defense spending. They're spending more than they want to tell us. I believe that nuclear war is inevitable. But if we worry about it from day to day, from second to second, we can't live.
# COLUMBUS BEST SELLERS

**HARDBACK**

1. *Pet Sematary* by Stephen King; Doubleday; $15.95.
2. *Smart Women* by Judy Blume; G.P. Putnam’s; $13.95.
4. *Poland* by James Michener; Random House; $17.95.
5. *On Wings of Eagles* by Ken Follett; Morrow; $16.95.
10. *Weightwatcher’s Fast and Fabulous Cookbook* by Jean Nidetch; NAL; $15.50.

**PAPERBACK**

2. *Ascent Into Hell* by Andrew Greely; Warner Books; $3.95.
FORMER President Jimmy Carter uttered the phrase, "Why not the best?" If you've been wondering the same thing — namely, why hasn't The Dispatch announced the results of its Best of Columbus contest — the answer is that we've been counting ballots.

Yes, it's true. Almost 1,000 of the little beauties came sailing into this office, indicating the personal tastes and habits of our fellow citizens. Secrets you might not reveal to your best friend or your analyst — where you go to work off last week's double-nut, triple-fudge sundae, for instance — were cheerfully recorded on the ballots.

Anyway, we're grateful to those who participated, and our hearty congratulations to the winners. A few triumphs seemed to have had a hand in their destinies — a phenomenon commonly referred to as stuffing the ballot box. But as long as entries conformed to the rules, we counted them.

So here goes. The cream of the crop, the top of the mark, the best of the best. Columbus' finest, designated as such not by a bunch of crusty old newspaper employees from their ivory tower Downtown, but by you, the reader:

- **Best Exercise Facility**: Arlington Nautilus, 2812 Fishinger Rd. Nobody else was even close. The Arlington ballots came all in one big, neat stack, which made us suspicious about their spontaneity, but we don't argue with folks who lift weights on a regular basis.

- **Best Place to Jog**: Antrim Park, 5800 Olentangy River Rd. This race was better than the Boston Marathon. Lots of entries, lots of excitement. Griggs Reservoir was neck-in-neck with Antrim down the home stretch, but the latter prevailed.

- **Best Day Care**: Only two votes total in this category. Apparently the people with kids don't have time to enter contests.

- **Best Brunch**: T.G.I. Friday's. A last-minute flurry of ballot punches for Rocky's, with other votes split among dozens of challengers. This is a brunch-crazy place.

- **Best Library Branch**: Ohio State University. Gown beats town. Nobody said why, but OSU's main library wrote the book on winning this one.

- **Best Playground**: Northam Park, Tremont Rd., Upper Arlington. A genuine playground paradise, complete with ball fields, swing sets, kid-powered merry-go-rounds, monkey bars, ride toys and a giant tire swing.

- **Best Place to Bowl**: Sawmill Lanes, 4825 Sawmill Rd. This was a busy category, with entries to spare. Sawmill rolled over the opposition.

- **Best Neighborhood Bar**: The late Scioto Trails. What can we say? These patrons obviously are loyal — and literate. There were other names submitted, but nothing even close to the outpouring for Scioto Trails. A toast to the winner — or the memory thereof.

- **Best Store for Cooking Gadgets**: The Cookstore, Lane Avenue Center. One ballot-writer responded, "Who cooks?" But for those whose ideas of a culinary masterpiece go beyond a carry-out pizza, this is the place.

- **Best Baked Potato**: Wendy's. Maybe the company will change the famous slogan to, "Where's the potato?" A challenge from Rax, but readers say Wendy's is No. 1 with the spuds.

- **Best Computer**: Apple II. Other vote-getters included IBM's PC and Commodore 64, but the Apple bobbed to the top.

- **Friendliest Fast-Food Clerks**: Flags Beer, Wine & Deli, 2818 Fishinger Rd. Of the myriad fast-food establishments in the Columbus area, nearly every one was mentioned. Service with a slew of smiles.

- **Best Golf Ball**: Titlest. Lots of derogatory remarks adorned this category; apparently some people felt that with the threat of nuclear war hanging over our heads, quibbling about golf balls was a tad irrelevant. Many versions of "Who cares?" appeared in the margins.

- **Best Board Game**: Chest. Chets? Yep, the old standby beat out all of the fifties upstarts, including Trivial Pursuit and Othello. Your move.

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NIELSEN RATINGS

**Grammy Awards give CBS its 16th win**

Despite two specials (Lace, Part 2 and A Streetcar Named Desire) and two series (Dynasty and Hotel) in the top 10, ABC still failed to clinch a win in the most recent Nielsen race. The high ratings earned by the Grammy Awards show and a sprinkling of other shows that hit the top 10 gave CBS its 16th first-place finish of the 16th season. For the week ending March 5, the 23rd week of the season, CBS averaged an 18.6 rating, ABC averaged an 18.0 rating, and NBC averaged a 14.5 rating.

**The Nielsen race to date**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Jan. 29</th>
<th>Feb. 6</th>
<th>Feb. 13</th>
<th>Feb. 20</th>
<th>Feb. 27</th>
<th>March 5</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CBS</strong></td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
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**The week's ratings**

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A ranking point represents a 1 percent of the average 32.5 million television homes. A share point represents a 1 percent of homes with TV's tuned in during the time period.

**USA Today**
USA SNAPSHOTS 3-5-84

A look at statistics that shape the nation

Woman in the White House

If you agree with the political views of a 1988 woman presidential candidate, would she get your vote? In a poll released today, here's what 15,000 people say:

- Definitely would: 33%
- Probably would: 31%
- Probably wouldn't: 15%
- Definitely wouldn't: 12%

Source: Walt Disney World/Epcot Poll 1984

By Warren Isenses, USA TODAY
# How we rate lawyers

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<td>35%</td>
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<td>Work hard to protect client interests</td>
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<td>Charge fair fees</td>
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## About the poll

The USA TODAY Poll is based on interviews with 807 adults selected at random across the USA by Gordon Black Corp. of Rochester, N.Y., on Feb. 17-19. The random sample has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent.
CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVE'S SURVEY

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you approve of the manner in which President Reagan has handled domestic policy?
   □ □ □ □

2. Do you approve of the manner in which President Reagan has handled foreign policy?
   □ □ □ □

3. A number of commissions have recently published reports which conclude that American high schools are doing a poor job of educating our young people in academic subjects. How do you feel about the quality of education in high schools with which you are familiar?
   HERE: ________________________________

4. Do you support negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union to stop the testing, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons as a step towards arms reductions?
   □ □ □ □

5. Would you say the U.S. should send more troops to Lebanon, leave the number about the same, or remove the troops that are there now? (Please check the one with which you agree):
   - Remove troops
   - Leave number the same
   - Send more troops
   □ □ □ □

6. In September, the Congress gave President Reagan a time limit of 18 months during which he may keep the Marines in Lebanon without Congressional approval. Do you think that time limit is too long, not long enough or about right? (Please check the one with which you agree):
   - Too long
   - About right
   - Not long enough
   □ □ □ □

7. In your view, what is our most important national problem?
   - a) the projected size of the federal budget deficit
   - b) unemployment
   - c) inflation
   - d) high interest rates
   - e) quality of education in our high schools
   - f) peace abroad (Lebanon, El Salvador, Rest of World)
   - g) crime
   - h) nuclear arms race
   - i) other
   □ □ □ □

Age of constituent:
   18-27 □ □ □ □
   28-41 □ □ □ □
   42-57 □ □ □ □
   Over 57 □ □ □ □

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

POSTAL CUSTOMER
18th CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
OHIO

Chalmers
## Appendix B
### PARTICIPANT LIST

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* subscribes to *The New York Times*
♦ not a subscriber but indicated read *The New York Times* on a regular basis

**EDUCATION KEY**
hs = high school
sc = some college
cc = completed college
grad = graduate school
Appendix C

POST-DISCUSSION QUESTIONNAIRE

PLEASE ANSWER EACH QUESTION AS BEST AS YOU CAN.

1. On an average weekday how many hours per day do you watch TV? _____ hours

2. About how many days per week do you watch the local early evening or the local late evening news broadcast on television? _____ days

3. About how many days per week do you watch the national evening network news -- the programs that usually begin after the local news? _____ days

4. Which, if any, newspapers do you read during a typical week?

5. What magazines do you read during a typical month?

6. In recent years there has been a tremendous increase in the number of organizations which conduct polls and a rise in the number of poll results being reported. Some argue that news stories reporting the public's opinion on a wide range of social, political and economic issues are unnecessary. Others argue that such publicized poll results are useful. How do you tend to view these publicized poll results?
   1. highly useful
   2. somewhat useful
   3. somewhat unnecessary
   4. highly unnecessary
   5. don't know

7. Why?

8. In general, when you read or hear about a public opinion poll how much confidence do you have in the results reported?
   1. a lot of confidence
   2. fair amount of confidence
   3. little confidence
   4. no confidence

9. Why?
10. Below is a list of various national and local organizations that conduct public opinion polls. For each organization that you're familiar with, please indicate your perception of the overall quality of their polling efforts and results.

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11. There has been much research concerning the impact of publicized poll results on individual preferences. In your opinion, how much influence does each of the below listed polls have on your perceptions and opinions?

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<td>a. Top &quot;10&quot; records</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/39</td>
<td>b. lifestyle issues (ex.: polls on pre-marital behavior; gay rights; changing family relations, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/40</td>
<td>c. best sellers book lists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/41</td>
<td>d. political candidate preference polls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/42</td>
<td>e. TV ratings (Top &quot;20&quot; shows) - Nielsen ratings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUESTIONNAIRE (CONT'D.)

12. Suppose you were having a conversation or discussion with friends, coworkers, or family members about some important issues of the day. If you wanted to support your argument in order to be more persuasive would you mention the following sources?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Would Mention</th>
<th>Might Mention</th>
<th>Would Not Mention</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. newspaper/magazine articles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. newspaper/magazine editorials</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. published public opinion polls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. television news stories</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. television news editorials/commentaries</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. television talk show interviews</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. radio news stories</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOW SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOURSELF.

13. In general, how interested are you in politics?

1. very interested
2. somewhat interested
3. not very interested
14. How often do you discuss politics with others?

1. almost every day
2. few times per week
3. about once per week
4. hardly ever

15. Which of the following clubs or groups do you belong to?
   (Check the appropriate items.)
   
   ___ labor union
   ___ political club or group
   ___ organizations concerned with specific group's rights
       (ex.: Tenant's Union; Pro-life; etc.)
   ___ fraternal organization or lodge
       (ex.: Masons; Knights of Columbus; etc.)
   ___ PTA
   ___ business, professional, or civic groups
   ___ farm groups
   ___ church or church connected groups
   ___ others (specify) ____________________________

FOR EACH OF THE ITEMS LISTED BELOW PLEASE INDICATE WHETHER YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The world in which we live is basically a friendly place.  
I don't get invited out by friends as often as I'd really like.  
I would be uncomfortable if I accidentally went to a formal party in street clothes.  
A person should adapt his/her ideas and his/her behavior to the group that happens to be with him/her at the time.  
Sometimes I feel all alone in the world.  
Before I do something I try to consider how my friends will react to it.  
People are just naturally friendly and helpful.
### QUESTIONNAIRE (CONT'D.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Real friends are as easy as ever to find.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I would be uncomfortable in anything other than fairly conventional dress.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I dislike a man/woman who is frequently blunt in his/her speech.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Most people today seldom feel lonely.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I like unconventional language.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I don't get to visit friends as often as I'd really like.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>There are few dependable ties between people any more.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I dislike men/women who always follow the usual social conventions (manners, customs, etiquette, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>One can always find friends if he/she shows himself/herself friendly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. What is your occupation? __________________________________________

18. In what year were you born? 19____

19. What is the highest grade of school completed?

1. some high school
2. completed high school
3. some college
4. completed college
5. graduate school
8. don't know

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Reynolds, Fred and Deborah K. Johnson, "Validity of Focus Group Findings," in *Focus Group Interviews: A Reader*. Hig-


