

# Horse-Race Journalism: Reporting the Polls in the 1976 Presidential Election

C. ANTHONY BROH

The kinds of data obtained by public opinion research and disseminated in the mass media seem designed more to entertain than to inform. The quality of the information conveyed seems not much different from that conveyed in the sports pages or, better yet, the daily racing form.

—MILTON ROKEACH (1968)

The polls have not been as imaginative as they could have been in elucidating the real issues and underlying forces in the election. There has been too much fixation on the horse race.

—ALBERT H. CANTRIL (1976)

**A**ND they're off. Coming out of the gate, the first "Polls Shows [sic] Blacks Decisive for Carter." Midway through August, "Poll Shows Slide in Carter Margin." Into September, "Polls Show Ford Trailing in Bid for Two Voter Groups GOP Needs." At the halfway mark in the campaign, "Voter Poll Finds Debate Aided Ford and Cut Carter's Lead." As the candidates approach the final month of campaigning, "First Time Ford Is Ahead of Carter," and even more exciting, "Poll Calls Race Tied." And in the stretch, "Survey Shows Carter Holds Lead." At the wire it's Jimmy Carter elected president.

That is the way the lead stories in the *New York Times* called the Bicentennial running of Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. The candidate may take a short lead out of the gate, become fatigued and change

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**Abstract** Reporting of public opinion polls conformed to a horse-race image of campaign reporting during the 1976 presidential election. Journalists avoided prediction, reported segments of the sample, selectively compared results, emphasized spectacles, questioned the validity of polling, made a few mistakes, and ignored certain data in their reporting. All these activities reinforced the image of elections as a sporting event.

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strides at the quarter pole, lose momentum and slow down on the back stretch, or win by a nose because of a media blitz in the home stretch. The race is exciting to follow from beginning to end.

For journalists, the horse-race metaphor provides a framework for analysis. A horse is judged not by its absolute speed or skill but in comparison to the speed of other horses, and especially by its wins and losses. Similarly, candidates are pushed to discuss other candidates; events are understood in a context of competition; and picking the winner becomes an important topic. The race—not the winner—is the story. The candidate's image, personality, staff relations, and strategy are the main foci of reporting.

Furthermore, with the horse-race metaphor journalists can generate interest among voters, most of whom don't get the chance to observe the candidates in person. By reporting and interpreting events for the uninvolved electorate through an easily understood image, the mass media forge a vital link in a democracy between the people and their elected officials. Thus the seeming trivialization of one of America's greatest democratic phenomena actually fosters the democratic process.

However, the image of a horse race presents some problems. Important issues of public policy may go unnoticed if the candidates agree on a position, and conversely, seemingly unimportant issues may receive undue attention because they fit the horse-race metaphor. For example, in 1976 Jimmy Carter's contradictory utterances about the resignation of FBI Director Clarence Kelly and his off-the-cuff statements in a *Playboy* magazine interview about adultery received great attention. These stories were not about issues of public policy; journalists perceived them in the framework of campaign strategy—the conduct of the race. However, they can affect the outcome. The Clarence Kelly "issue" may have influenced voters who thought Carter was "fuzzy on issues." Similarly, the *Playboy* interview may have adversely influenced voters who thought of Carter as a moral, Christian leader. But neither "issue" informed the voters about Carter's public policy concerns.

Even the evaluation of the incumbent president's record is distorted by the horse-race metaphor. In 1976 the press presented Gerald Ford as a candidate prone to falls and spills, an image supported by a film clip of the president slipping on the stairs of Air Force One. When Ford described the people of Poland, Yugoslavia, and Rumania in the second televised debate as "free from Soviet domination," the gaffe reinforced the physical image of a stumbling, bumbling president. The statement was not consistent with Ford's two-year record in office; yet the story was newsworthy because it fit the horse-race metaphor.

Thus the metaphor is both greatly beneficial and occasionally

harmful to the electoral process. It provides journalists with a meaningful framework, but this very framework can induce distortion. It can heighten citizen involvement, but at the cost of ignoring important issues.

This article focuses on the effect of the horse-race image on journalists' reporting. More specifically, it examines how reporting public opinion polls conformed to the horse-race framework in the 1976 presidential campaign.

### Interpreting the Polls

Above all else, public opinion polls show who is currently ahead. A study of 500 articles during the 1976 presidential election (Carmody, 1976:21) suggests that virtually all articles using polls reported which candidate is ahead. My analysis of 65 articles in the *New York Times*, 57 national television news stories about polls, and 8 national news magazine stories (*Time* and *Newsweek*) between Labor Day and Election Day 1976 concurs with Carmody's conclusion. The few stories that did not report who is ahead dealt exclusively with the methodology of the survey.<sup>1</sup>

Within the format of reporting who is ahead, journalists have considerable flexibility in their interpretation of poll data. They can predict the election outcome or simply report the findings. They can report the percentage support for each candidate or the difference between the candidates. They can report the data for the entire electorate or for subcategories of it. They can select a point of comparison with which to interpret the polls. They can report voter reaction to spectacles during the campaign rather than report the current popularity of each candidate. They can report poll results accurately or erroneously. They can question the validity of a particular poll. Finally, they can ignore polls. In the 1976 campaign, reporters made use of all these techniques. In most cases, their usage emphasized the horse-race image of the campaign. Let us examine these patterns of poll reporting.

### FORECASTING

Forecasting the outcome of a campaign may be the most newsworthy aspect of a poll. Thus one might expect journalists to take every

<sup>1</sup> Reports of polls in the 1976 election generally discussed the sampling error, but few quoted the actual wording of the questions (see Carmody, 1976). The *New York Times* and television network news focused exclusively on the methodology of survey research in 9 percent and 3 percent, respectively, of their stories on polls.

**Table 1. References to Public Opinion Polls and the Presidency in the New York Times and Television Evening News from September 1 to November 2, 1976**

	<i>New York Times</i> ( <i>N</i> = 65)	<i>Television News</i> ( <i>N</i> = 57)
Forecasting of results in report	( 6%)	(16%)
Forecasts tie or too close to call	5	14
Forecasts winner	2	2
Figures of presidential trial-heat reported	(15)	(25)
Subcategories of population reported	(61)	(56)
Sample of region, state, county, or city only	31	24
Issue preference category reported	15	12
Candidate style preference category reported	5	8
Social grouping reported	23	10
Uncertain group of voters reported	14	8
Shifts in polls reported	(12)	(14)
Compared with pre-Labor Day	5	2
Compared with post-Labor Day	3	2
Compared with previous election	2	3
Compared with unspecified time	6	10
Report on spectacle of campaign	(17)	(14)
Debates	11	12
East European gaffe, <i>Playboy</i> Interview, etc.	3	0
Turnout of Election Day	3	2
Distortion of poll results	(5)	(2)
Reported in media	3	2
Unreported in media	2	0
Ignoring results	(6)	(3)

NOTE: Each entry is the percentage of articles employing a stated technique for reporting public opinion polls. The percentages do not total 100% since one article may have used several techniques. Numbers in italics are the net percentages of articles in each category.

opportunity to make predictions. But forecasting has its perils for journalists. Once they have forecast the results, journalists would have very little left to say; why worry about the process if the outcome seems clear-cut? Moreover, early forecasts might negate citizen interest in the process itself, make the reporter look foolish if he is wrong, and raise the specter of journalism’s influencing the outcome it has predicted. My analysis of the media found only two instances of forecasting the winner, both very late in the campaign. One week before the election, the *New York Times* carried an article quoting political scientist Gerald Pomper, who stated that Carter would win with 54 percent. Two days before Election Day, ABC carried a film clip of Jimmy Carter stating that he would win, while the Ford White House, also reflecting on the polls, said the race was too close to call. The only forecasts that did not use an *outside* source came within the final two weeks of the campaign, and forecast a close race, too close to call. Thus I found no instances of journalists themselves forecasting the winner. In total, the *Times* reported fore-

casts of any kind in only 6 percent of the articles about public opinion; evening television news stories did so in 16 percent.<sup>2</sup>

#### REPORTING THE FIGURES

Another technique that heightens interest in the horse race itself, not its winner, involves selective use of the data on presidential trial-heats.<sup>3</sup> Of the 65 *New York Times* articles referring to public opinion polls, 15 percent reported the actual percentages of each candidate in the presidential trial-heat. The other 85 percent presented the difference between the candidates, percentages for a portion of the population, the answers to questions other than vote intention, etc. Television news stories were only slightly more direct even though visual presentation of figures with audio overlay is equally appropriate for this medium. Only 25 percent of the television news stories reported the percentages favoring each candidate both orally and visually.

Not reporting the percentages for the candidates was a policy decision at the *Times*, made in an effort to avoid the horse-race image of the campaign.<sup>4</sup> Ironically the policy may have had the opposite effect. Since journalists could not report who was ahead, they focused on other aspects of the poll—such as the percentage difference between the candidates, increases (or decreases) since an earlier poll, or, in one case, the actual percentages reported by other polling agencies—all of which emphasize the horse-race image by focusing on changes in the position of the horses on the track.

#### SUBCATEGORIES OF THE POPULATION

Reporters most often use polls to present the preferences of a subcategory of the population. They use five subcategories: a regional, state, county, or city sample; a national poll of issue preferences; a national poll of preferences on candidate style; a social grouping in the population; and uncertain voters.

*Regional polls.* Election years produce many polls in small geo-

<sup>2</sup> The difference between media for all reporting techniques was not significantly different:  $\chi^2 = .783$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p = \text{n.s.}$

<sup>3</sup> Trial-heat refers to the question that asks how people would vote if the election were held on the day of the interview. Since 1936, the Gallup Organization has always asked this question with only slight variations in wording. In 1976 registered voters were asked: "If the Presidential Election were being held today, which candidates would you vote for—the Democratic candidates Carter and Mondale, or the Republican candidates Ford and Dole?"

<sup>4</sup> See the paper by William Kovach in this issue.

**Table 2. National and State Polls of Presidential Trial-Heats Reported in the New York Times and Television Evening News from September 1 to November 2, 1976**

	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>Television News</i>
State		
No direct reference to agency	8	5
Field	3	3
Buffalo Evening News	2	0
Darden Research	2	0
Chicago Sun Times	1	1
Chicago Tribune	1	0
Minneapolis Tribune	1	0
Rutgers University	1	1
Wilmington News Journal	1	0
Other	1	0
Columbus, OH <sup>a</sup>	0	1
Milwaukee, WI <sup>a</sup>	0	1
Subtotal	21	12
National		
New York Times (CBS)	27	6
Gallup (Newsweek)	13	13
No direct reference to agency	8	10
Caddell	6	1
Harris (ABC)	6	18
Roper (PBS)	4	2
Yankelovich (Time)	3	0
Other	3	10
Chilton Research (Associated Press)	2	2
Nielson Ratings	2	0
NBC News	0	3
Subtotal	74	65
Grand total	95	77

<sup>a</sup> Polling Agency not Reported.

NOTE: The networks emphasized their commissioned polls more than other polls; the ABC-commissioned Harris poll and the NBC News poll were reported more on television than in the *Times*. Conversely, the *Times* referred more often to its jointly sponsored poll with CBS than to any other poll.

graphic areas. The Field Poll, for example, has a reputation for reliably assessing voter opinion in California; the Rutgers Poll shares a similar reputation in New Jersey; and several newspaper polls are widely respected. State polls generate interest among nonstate residents by providing information about pivotal states such as California, New York, New Jersey, or Illinois. Thus, most state polls reported by the *Times* or the TV networks were conducted in northern industrial states with a history of being on the winning side. Such polls indicate the trends in key states that may affect the outcome (see Broh, 1981). Thirty-one percent of the references to polling in the newspapers, and 24 percent on television were to state, county, or city polls.

*Issue preferences.* When issue-oriented voters prefer one candidate

on one issue but the other candidate on a second issue, the focus on issues is particularly suited to capturing voter interest. A *Times*/CBS poll released on October 15, for example, showed the candidate preferences of voters with various issue positions. The report (Apple, 1976:B4) states: "One of the key issues is economic. The *Times*/CBS survey showed for example, that Mr. Carter is winning overwhelmingly among those who cite unemployment as their dominant concern, as would be expected."

But the same poll showed that Carter was only even with Ford among those concerned about inflation. Thus the *Times* reader who is worried about both unemployment and inflation received a message of a closely contested campaign.

According to a report of the National Council on Public Polls and the Gannett Journalism Center at Northwestern University, 8 percent of the newspaper articles in 1976 dealt with issues in this manner (Carmody, 1976:21). These findings concur roughly with my analysis, which shows 15 percent of the *Times* reports and 12 percent of the television news reports focusing on this subcategory. While not overwhelming, this amount of reportage on issues suggests that the horse-race metaphor does not lend itself to reporting on issues that are complex or hotly but simplistically contested.

*Preferences on candidate style.* For example, the *New York Times*/CBS survey showed Carter leading among people who saw him as a conservative (Reinhold, 1976a; 1976b:32). Five percent of the *New York Times* articles and 8 percent of the television evening news broadcasts about public opinion polls focused on preferences for candidate style. Stories referred to confidence in the president, and the honesty, credibility, and character of both candidates. While the character of the candidates is obviously of crucial importance for a meaningful democratic choice, the horse-race metaphor runs the risk of emphasizing beauty—some horses are gorgeous animals—and neglecting differences on issues of substance.

*Social groups.* People of different religions, occupations, races, regions, and ages have varying candidate and issue preferences. In particular, national polls often strive to report the opinions of members of the old New Deal coalition, especially when a particular group seems to be pivotal in the election outcome. For example, Catholic voters were polled after Ford referred to East Europeans as free from Soviet domination, and Jews were polled when New York State appeared crucial to Carter's success. Twenty-three percent of the *Times* articles and 10 percent of the television news reports focused on this type of polling information.

*Uncertain voters.* Voters who identify with neither the Democratic

nor the Republican party—and who are therefore unpredictable—may be seen as determining the election outcome. Thus on October 15, the *New York Times* front-page story (Apple, 1976:A1) had the following headlines: “Carter, Focusing on Ford Record, Gains Among Independents in Poll.” Similarly, “undecided” voters, who are highly volatile and can decide for either candidate, are important subjects for reporters (see DeVries and Tarrance, 1972). The *New York Times* began its predebate campaign story with the following headline: “Large Group of Undecided Voters Found Looking to Debates for Aid: Study Also Shows Much of Support for Carter and Ford Is Subject to Quick Change” (Reinhold, 1976a).

Like undecided voters or independents, people who support third-party candidates may affect the results and therefore receive great attention from horse-race-conscious journalists. Eugene McCarthy was portrayed as a candidate with support among young voters who recalled his anti-Vietnam War position eight years earlier. These voters were disproportionately Democrats and thus could conceivably swing to support Carter. On the other hand, Lester Maddox could siphon support away from fellow Georgian Jimmy Carter. Thus, the main emphasis of a September 9 NBC News report of a Harris poll (showing Carter in the lead) was the effect of the McCarthy vote, which made the outcome of the election difficult to forecast. Similarly, *Time* (1976b) reported on October 11 that “The Race Turns into a Dead Heat” with the following analysis: “The standoff turned up by the survey resulted from asking those polled to choose between the two main candidates. When the Yankelovich analysts figured in the effect of the minor candidates, Lester Maddox and Eugene McCarthy, Ford pulled ahead of Carter by 42% to 40%.” Fourteen percent of the *New York Times* articles and 8 percent of the television evening news broadcasts about public opinion polls focused on this form of uncertainty, thus enhancing voter interest in the electoral process.

#### SHIFTS IN POPULARITY

Another journalistic technique for enhancing interest through polls is comparing current and earlier poll data. Journalists can choose comparisons in order to describe the candidates as close or far apart, but usually their reports imply constantly changing opinion, so that a candidate can seem to win the race with a sudden burst of popularity.

Journalists must decide what to compare their data to: earlier polls by the same agency, other polls taken at the same time, polls in previous years at the same point in the campaign, and the like. An example of a reporter's use of this discretion to create excitement



turned up in an NBC interview with George Gallup on October 1, 1976, which concluded that *current trends* in Carter's lead over Ford would produce an election too close to call (Vanderbilt Television News Archive, 1976). This statement emphasized the shift in opinion while ignoring the actual 11 percent difference between the candidates in Gallup's poll.

A problem with comparing polls at one time to polls at another time is the interpretation of sampling error. Since most commercial polls have a sample size of 1,000 to 1,500 voters, the sampling error can be expected to be about 3 or 4 percent. The actual figure will depend upon the sampling techniques used by the agency and chance variation (Weisberg and Bowen, 1977). In recent years most newspaper accounts of polls report sampling error (Carmody, 1976) and sample size; however, the press rarely considers this factor in interpreting the results.<sup>5</sup> For example, several articles reported a shift in popularity measured by subtracting popularity at  $t_2$  from popularity at  $t_1$ . Thus a change from 58 percent to 54 percent would have been reported as a 4 percent decrease. However, the 4 percent may not signify attitude change since a popularity rating of 56 percent, for example, at both  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  is within the sampling error of both figures. Thus on October 1 the *Times* report showing an 18 percent difference between Carter and Ford at  $t_1$ , and an 8 percent difference at  $t_2$  may, or may not, have reflected a net attitude change of 10 percent. Nevertheless, the *Times* reported the figures as attitude change. Similarly the "Fluttering, Stuttering Polls" described by *Time* magazine (1976b) in a postelection article could have been due to a neglect in considering sampling error.

A problem with comparing polls of one agency with the polls of another agency is the variation in undecided voters, which changes for several reasons. Some voters decide how to vote late in the campaign; sampling error produces fluctuations in the percentage of undecided voters; and the polling agencies give interviewers different instructions about pressing respondents for an answer. Speaking before the Associated Press Managing Editors Conference, Burns Roper noted, "There is also the problem of deciding whether to force the undecided voters to [make] a choice, and, if so, how and how forcefully and whether to allocate the remaining undecided voters to the candidates" (quoted in Carmody, 1976). Clearly, the number of unde-

<sup>5</sup> The American Association for Public Opinion Research has published minimum standards of disclosure for news releases about public opinion polls. It urges news media to include the following information when preparing final copy for publication or broadcast: sponsor, question wording, population, sample size, subcategories of response, type of interview, and time of survey.

cided voters changed from poll to poll in the 1976 campaign.<sup>6</sup> These changes may have come about because of random variation or biased results due to interview techniques. That is, the undecided voters may disproportionately favor one candidate over another.<sup>7</sup> Most important to our discussion, the bias in one sample may differ from the bias in another. Journalists will report the resulting differences in candidate support as attitude change, and thus make a campaign appear much more volatile than it really is.

Furthermore, in 1976 the selection of a date for comparison produced different images of the race. By comparing the candidates' popularity during the campaign to popularity before Labor Day, journalists could present a catch-up image of the Ford campaign. By comparing the candidates' popularity during the campaign to popularity after Labor Day, journalists could present a nose-to-nose image of the campaign. A third possibility was to compare Carter's lead in the polls to other candidates' popularity in previous years. Franklin Roosevelt's and Richard Nixon's landslide victories in 1936 and 1972, respectively, were typical points of comparison, and were used to emphasize Carter's slippage in popularity. Table 1 reports the percentage of articles in the *New York Times* and television evening news stories about polls which reported a shift in public opinion in comparison to some prior point.

#### REPORTING CAMPAIGN EVENTS

Another reporting technique for generating excitement is to emphasize spectacles or special events during the campaign. The *New York Times* did this in 17 percent of its reports, television in 14 percent. The televised debates, for example, showed the candidates in face-to-face competition, permitting the armchair jockey to evaluate the race as it headed toward the finish line. Furthermore, since campaign staffs provide predebate plans and strategy, and news commentators emphasize each candidate's viability for office based on his performance, the most feeble candidate can appear more capable—and thus a close contender in the election.

By reporting figures on public perceptions of the debate winner while ignoring figures on overall public preferences, the *New York*

<sup>6</sup> Between Labor Day and Election Day the *Times* reported the results of 14 different national polls. The number of voters reported as not favoring either Carter or Ford varied from 18 percent to 7 percent; these extremes were reported on the same day (see Broh, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> People who respond "I don't know" to a survey question are disproportionately nonwhite, low-educated, low-income, and noninvolved (see Francis and Busch, 1975; Converse, 1976–1977).

*Times* heightened the citizen's involvement with the spectacle. In addition, the media emphasized the degree of competition, not the victory. On September 24, the day after the first Carter-Ford debate, NBC reported the Associated Press poll calling the debate slightly in favor of President Ford, but emphasized that 24 percent believed the debate to be a draw. Two days later CBS placed similar emphasis on the 39 percent in its poll who had no opinion about the winner of the debates or thought the debate was a draw. To the extent that the debates changed voters' minds about the candidates, the results were "closing the gap on Mr. Carter" (Vanderbilt Television News Archive, 1976:1997).

By heightening voter interest, this selective emphasis in reporting polls is a valuable aspect of the media's role in the democratic process. But the media sometimes go beyond what a democratic theorist might wish by encouraging voters to focus on events that affect campaign strategy but that may have little impact on a president's behavior. These media-created spectacles are then used to analyze trends or shifts among voters. For example, in an interview with *Playboy* magazine, Jimmy Carter discussed his religion and "lust for women." Obviously Carter's sexual desires or the fact that he was interviewed in a "sex magazine" would not affect policy positions or issues after the campaign. However, these questions may have influenced many voters after the media singled out the *Playboy* interview as an important event and a cause of increasing electoral competition. Changes in the polls, according to reporters, resulted from this political miscalculation. Similarly, Gerald Ford erred in the second debate when he said: "I don't believe, Mr. Frankel, that the Yugoslavians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. I don't believe that the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. Each of these countries is independent or autonomous" (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1976:930). After the gaffe, public opinion polls reported that Catholics of East European ancestry were returning to the Democratic ranks. The high concentration of Catholics in Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee could have affected Ford's chances in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin—states crucial to GOP strategy. By focusing on event-linked changes in the polls, the media encouraged citizens to weigh statements in terms of their effect on the campaign, not on United States foreign policy.

Events occurring during the campaign affect a candidate's support and thus his position in the race. Each mistake, each appearance, each stumble is important because it affects the candidate's strategy and might even cause his campaign to falter for a moment. By emphasizing these events reporters focus on the volatility of public

opinion, the unpredictability of the race, and the significance of campaign statements rather than actual behavior.

#### INACCURACIES IN REPORTING

In a few instances, minor inaccuracies occurred in the reporting of polls, and always in a manner that indicated a close race. For example, on September 2, David Brinkley reported the latest Gallup poll as giving Carter 52 percent and Ford 37 percent. The Gallup Organization's postelection report showed the results of the same poll as 54–36 (Gallup, 1976:13), a 3 percent wider difference than the NBC spread. *Time* magazine reported a Yankelovich poll of late September as a tie, 43 percent to 43 percent (*Time*, 1976b:16). A month later, *Time*'s (1976a:17) retrospective analysis showed that Ford actually led in the poll, 43 percent to 41 percent. Although the difference was only in allocation of the McCarthy vote, the report confounded the interpretation of a 4 percent lead taken by Carter in the following month's poll, and negated the contention of the September story that the campaign was a "dead heat." Similarly, the *New York Times* exaggerated the effect of the first debate in its report of a Gallup poll showing an 8 percent difference between the trial-heat popularity of Carter and Ford. The poll, taken September 24 to 27 and the first after the debates, was highly influential in producing the illusion that Ford was "catching up." The October 1 *New York Times* (1976a:8) story had the following lead: "Carter Margin in Gallup Poll Is Cut to 50–42. The latest Gallup Poll on the Presidential contest shows that Jimmy Carter's lead over President Ford has been reduced from 18 percentage points to 8." Gallup's (1976:13) postelection analysis reports the poll results as 51 to 40 percent.

With no attempt to deceive or mislead voters, the cumulative effect of these individually trivial inaccuracies is nonetheless to heighten the sense of competition and to sharpen the image of a horse race. They are perhaps most important as a demonstration of the unconscious power of the drive to maintain voter—and reader or viewer—interest.

#### IGNORING RELEVANT DATA

Still another technique for dealing with poll data is to ignore or downplay them, especially if the poll shows the candidates apart. For example, the *New York Times* and CBS commissioned several polls during the 1976 presidential campaign, one of which was conducted between October 8 and 12 and released to the public on October 15. The Gallup Organization also conducted a poll during the same pe-

riod, October 8 through October 11. The *Times* (Apple, 1976) emphasized the six-point difference reported by Gallup and played down its own poll which made the race seem slightly less competitive. The fourth paragraph of the page-one story read as follows:

### 6 Point Edge for Carter

A new national survey by the Gallup organization, the results of which were disclosed yesterday, gave Mr. Carter the edge by 6 percentage points, 48 to 42. A simultaneous national poll by Patrick Caddell for Mr. Carter put his margin at 8 points. The *Times*/CBS findings, which were based on telephone interviews with 1,761 registered voters between October 8 and 12, fell into the same general range.

The lead sentence suggests that the 6 percent edge is “correct,” while other percentages are either biased—since Caddell worked for Carter—or close enough to be “the same.” However, the *Times*’s own poll showed 44 percent for Carter and 37 percent for Ford—a 7-percent difference.<sup>8</sup> While 7 percent is clearly within the range of the Gallup poll difference, the *Times* reported and emphasized the smaller figure of an outside polling agency. Moreover, the reference to the *Times* poll which emphasized its methodology (“1,761 registered voters between October 8 and 12”) had the effect of bolstering the reliability of the Gallup poll, whose sample size it did not report.

NBC News explicitly ignored the poll data in its September 16 news report (Vanderbilt Television News Archive, 1976:1941). John Chancellor announced that vice presidential candidate Walter Mondale was campaigning around the country, and then stated, “Despite public opinion polls, Carter and Mondale may be in a tight race.” The story that followed showed Mondale on the campaign trail and Democrats and labor leaders saying the race was too close for comfort in their states of Ohio, California, Michigan, Indiana, New Jersey, and Illinois. The story implies that local leaders “know” how close the race really is while the national polls are misleading. This kind of report did not appear later in the campaign when the national polls showed the candidates to be very close.

### Conclusions and Discussion

The horse-race metaphor of campaigns is not new. The *Boston Journal* in 1888 proclaimed that a “dark horse” is unlikely to emerge from the campaign. In 1924, the *New York Times* ran the following

<sup>8</sup> Information received by the author in a telephone conversation with Dwight Morris, March 20, 1980.

headline about the Democratic convention: “With 21 Candidates, It Is Now The Field Against M’Adoo” (Keylin and Nelson, 1976). What is noteworthy is that polling technology of computer-drawn samples, random digit dialing, and carefully constructed questions has conformed so easily to the traditional reporting techniques of journalists.

Viewing a presidential campaign as a horse race, then, has a long tradition. A democratic theorist might decry this rather crude connection between a sporting, indeed a betting, event, and the ideals of democracy. Where in all of this is Rousseau’s informed and committed participant in the events that shape his life, Jefferson’s freedom-loving farmer, de Tocqueville’s equality-loving entrepreneur, V. O. Key’s rational voter? But it is one thing to uphold democratic ideals; it is a very different thing to condemn the media for using a sporting image to frame their analyses of elections.

The horse-race metaphor in fact has several valuable functions. First, and most important, it enhances the public’s interest in a process that could seem remote, mysterious, and boring. If citizens are more attracted to sports than to politics, why not use sports to teach them about politics? Because it makes the electoral process appear as exciting and competitive as possible, the horse-race image maintains a vital link between the mass of people and a very few elected officials. Second, the horse-race image induces reporters to focus on polls that hold great interest for special groups of voters. Reporting the views of Californians, or Catholics, or proponents of gun control may not give us much sense of how our candidate is doing overall, but it is of vital importance to westerners, the religious community, and gun owners. Finally, the horse-race image mitigates the danger inherent in the very existence of the mass media—that reporters could have much more influence than they or others want by settling on a winner early in the process and turning the campaign into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The horse-race image encourages reporters to emphasize competition rather than to forecast results.

However, we must conclude with a note of caution. My analysis of the 1976 election shows two problems in the use of the horse-race metaphor. First, reporters who seek a theme to make a story exciting may inadvertently distort polls to the point of nonsense. Burns Roper (1976) illustrated the discrepancies in the use of his poll in a satirical letter to the editor of the *New York Times*:

To the Editor:

. . . It had not occurred to me to combine from our “instant” debate poll the 31 percent who thought Governor Carter won with the 30 percent who felt it was a draw and conclude “. . . a total of 61 percent of those polled thought that the debate was a draw or a Carter victory.” Nor was I perspicacious

enough to recognize that “in political terms,” that was an excellent result for the nominee of the stronger party. [However, I became more confused when I read] that since the President’s strength prior to the debate was only about 33 percent (more or less, depending on which poll you read), the debate was a victory for the President since his win-plus-draw figure was 61 percent according to the Associated Press poll—roughly twice the percentage preferring him prior to the debate. . . . I had looked simplistically at our 39 percent Ford, 31 percent Carter, 30 percent draw figures and concluded that President Ford has a small edge. It is now obvious to me that it was either a clear victory for Governor Carter or an overwhelming win for President Ford.

To Roper, scientifically drawn samples are more credible than journalists’ impressions—except when analysts use the polls to see whatever they like. Polls are as credible as their users; the search for excitement carries within it the danger of distortion.

Finally, the horse-race image can encourage voters to focus on exciting, but ultimately irrelevant aspects of a campaign. Just as bettors on a race may be misled by the beauty of the horses—champion thoroughbreds are often the least showy—voters may be misled by the trivia of a campaign. Pseudo-events that are created by the media, and whose effects on poll results are then analyzed by the same media for clues to the dynamics of a campaign, do the voters a disservice. Conversely, issues which are complex, not hotly debated, but more significant, may be passed over in the search for excitement.

In sum, the horse-race image frames the analysis of polls in an election with generally beneficial and sometimes deleterious effects. By enhancing the excitement of the campaign, the media draw the electorate closer to their elected representatives, with only occasional costs to the integrity of the poll data or the ideal democratic process.

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