

THE POLLS—A REVIEW

THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

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Pollsters have been involved in presidential elections for more than half a century, and by now the best are able to gauge public reactions to the competing candidates with impressive accuracy. But polling in state presidential primaries is, by comparison with that in general election campaigns, both a newer and a more difficult art: newer because the contemporary system of presidential nomination, with its intensive public focus on the candidates' performances in a long and decisive series of weekly primary elections, is less than twenty years old; more difficult because the primary season involves a more complex set of contests than the subsequent general election campaign. Primary season involves more candidates, fewer voters, a less-knowledgeable and less-committed public, and less-understood campaign and election rules than the general election. In 1988 Jesse Jackson, the first black candidate to have a chance to win the nomination of a major political party, introduced additional complexity to the primary season. By generating an essentially new political situation, Jackson helped to illuminate both the pollsters' standard operating procedures and their occasional innovations.

How—and how well—do pollsters deal with these primary season difficulties? Here we describe and assess the efforts of three prominent polling organizations in the 1988 presidential primary campaign: the Gallup Organization, the Harris Poll, and the CBS News/*New York*

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Times combine.¹ Our analysis is far from exhaustive, even with respect to this very limited set of polling operations. But then, our goal is not to render a balanced summary verdict about the competence or utility of these specific organizations' efforts in the 1988 campaign. Rather, our aim is to use these organizations' experiences to illustrate some of the possibilities and pitfalls facing any polling organization in a presidential primary campaign. In a concluding section we briefly address some more general issues regarding the role of polling in the presidential nominating process.

The Primary Season Polls

The thrusts of two major primary season polling efforts are evident in Tables 1 and 2, which list the 1988 state and national campaign polls conducted by the Gallup Organization² and by the CBS News/*New York Times* combine from the beginning of the calendar year through the end of the primary season in early June.

The Gallup Organization conducted early and late preprimary (or pre-caucus) polls in each of eight key states. Most of the early polls were conducted from three to five weeks before the primary, while the

1. Our choice of these three organizations was prompted in part by their public prominence among the large number of organizations engaged in polling during the 1988 presidential primary season, and in part by the ready availability of materials documenting their efforts.

2. The phrase "Gallup Poll" is used to describe two different departments at the Gallup Organization, Inc., but only one set of polls. The Gallup corporation contracted with a consortium of television stations (and some newspapers) called CONUS to conduct political polling in 1988. The Gallup/CONUS materials given to us for review were produced under this contract. The poll interpretations were released every Monday for broadcast on Tuesday evening. Larry Hugick and Andy Kohut compiled the data and wrote the stories under their own byline.

The second use of the term "Gallup Poll" refers to the syndicated article under the byline of George Gallup, Jr., and Alec Gallup. Jim Shriver wrote these articles, which were released for use in newspapers the morning after CONUS broadcast them. Newspapers purchasing the syndicated column were free to use all, part, or none of the text released by the Gallup Organization. At large metropolitan newspapers local reporters typically rewrote the article under their own bylines, picking data and prose freely from the Gallup release.

In 1988 the Gallup Organization also provided data under contract to *Newsweek* and the Times-Mirror newspaper chain. Polls conducted under these arrangements were not referred to as "Gallup Polls," but as, for example, "Newsweek Polls conducted by the Gallup Organization."

In this article we use the label "Gallup" to refer to the syndicated Gallup/Shriver column and "Gallup/CONUS" to refer to the Hugick/Kohut release for the CONUS consortium. We have not analyzed the use of Gallup data by *Newsweek* or the Times-Mirror chain.

We are grateful to Jim Shriver and Larry Hugick of the Gallup Organization for explaining this organizational structure to us and for making their offices available to our inquiries.

Table 1. Gallup Polls Conducted During the 1988 Primary Campaign

Dates	Coverage	Sample Size ^a			Type
		Reg	Dem	Rep	
1–3 Jan	Iowa	1,223	588	519	Telephone
8–10 Jan	New Hampshire	1,214	416	545	Telephone
15–17 Jan	South	1,201	370	322	Telephone
22–24 Jan	National	1,210	560	538	Telephone
29–31 Jan	Iowa	1,215	577	529	Telephone
12–14 Feb	New Hampshire	3,058	1,177	1,531	Telephone
19–21 Feb	South	1,208	426	333	Telephone
19–21 Feb	Massachusetts	1,227	639	331	Telephone
26–28 Feb	Florida	1,206	489	396	Telephone
26–28 Feb	Texas	1,207	483	496	Telephone
4–6 Mar	Florida	3,019	1,173	1,024	Telephone
4–6 Mar	Massachusetts	3,043	1,537	686	Telephone
4–6 Mar	Texas	3,078	1,302	1,139	Telephone
10–12 Mar	National	1,211	535	567	Telephone
25–27 Mar	New York	1,205	421	329	Telephone
8–10 Apr	Ohio	1,201	490	—	Telephone
15–17 Apr	New York	3,065	1,096	—	Telephone
21–23 Apr	National	1,204	584	—	Telephone
29 Apr–1 May	Ohio	3,033	1,556	—	Telephone
5–7 May	California	1,205	487	—	Telephone
13–15 May	National	1,204	608	—	Telephone
3–5 Jun	California	3,052	1,376	—	Telephone

NOTE: For final preprimary polls in New Hampshire, Florida, Massachusetts, Texas, New York, and Ohio, preliminary results were released based on first two nights’ polling, followed by final results based on full sample.

^a “Reg” refers to numbers of registered voters. “Dem” and “Rep” refer to numbers of registered party identifiers and “leaners” in national polls, and to numbers of registered voters who “plan to vote” in parties’ primaries in state polls.

late polls were invariably conducted on the weekend preceding a Tuesday primary. The emphasis on preprimary polls (and especially on late preprimary polls) presumably reflects and capitalizes upon Gallup’s status as the best-known “election caller” on the American political scene; scores of newspapers headlined Gallup’s late results in their final day or two of preprimary coverage.

By contrast, the CBS News/*New York Times* combine conducted preprimary or precaucus polls on only five occasions: once in Iowa, twice in New Hampshire, once in the South before Super Tuesday, and

Table 2. CBS News/*New York Times* Polls Conducted During the 1988 Primary Campaign

Dates	Coverage	Sample Size ^a			Type
		Tot	Dem	Rep	
2–5 Jan	Iowa	3,126	502	432	Telephone
17–21 Jan	National	1,663	602	438	Telephone
30–31 Jan ^b	National	1,187	447	319	Telephone
25–30 Jan ^c	New Hampshire	1,784	434	513	Telephone
8 Feb	Iowa	—	1,674	1,652	Entrance
9–13 Feb ^{cd}	New Hampshire	5,245	1,442	1,636	Telephone
13–15 Feb ^{ce}	New Hampshire	—	954	1,184	Telephone
16 Feb	New Hampshire	—	1,510	1,567	Exit
17–21 Feb	National ^f	2,734	933	684	Telephone
23 Feb ^c	South Dakota	—	934	1,014	Exit
28 Feb–2 Mar	South	1,922	666	421	Telephone
8 Mar	South	—	8,259	6,681	Exit
8 Mar	Florida	—	1,494	1,384	Exit
8 Mar	Texas	—	1,647	1,276	Exit
15 Mar	Illinois	—	1,593	854	Exit
19–22 Mar	National	1,654	?	?	Telephone
5 April	Wisconsin	—	934	—	Exit
11–13 April ^c	New York	2,115	581	—	Telephone
19 April	New York	—	2,100	—	Exit
26 April	Pennsylvania	—	2,095	—	Exit
3 May ^c	Indiana	—	1,375	—	Exit
3 May	Ohio	—	1,540	—	Exit
9–12 May	National	1,382	—	—	Telephone
7 Jun	California	—	1,894	—	Exit
7 Jun	New Jersey	—	761	—	Exit

^a “Tot” refers to total numbers of respondents; “Dem” and “Rep” refer to numbers of registered voters who “usually vote or are likely to vote this year in a primary or caucus of that party” or, in the case of exit polls, to actual primary voters.

^b Special “Bush/Rather Survey”; *New York Times* only.

^c CBS News only.

^d Tracking polls conducted 9–10 Feb, 10–11 Feb, and 12–13 Feb; results released separately.

^e Tracking polls conducted 13–14 Feb and 14–15 Feb among “likely primary voters”; results released separately.

^f Oversampling in Super Tuesday Southern and Border states produced 575 Democratic and 375 Republican primary voters in those states.

once in New York. Most of the combine's state or regional polls (a total of 14) were exit polls (or, in the case of the Iowa caucuses, an entrance poll) intended to explain after the fact why people voted the way they did.³ Typically, results from these polls were used by CBS News during election night coverage and by the *New York Times* in a long analytical story on the Thursday following each Tuesday's primary.

Both Gallup and the CBS News/*New York Times* combine conducted occasional national polls in addition to their state polls; in Gallup's case there were four national polls at roughly five-week intervals beginning in late January, for the combine there were four plus a special "Bush/Rather Survey" conducted in late January for the *New York Times* only.

The Louis Harris organization took a different tack, eschewing state polls entirely and conducting a total of seven national polls at roughly four-week intervals from early January through early June. The Harris polls were conducted by telephone with total sample sizes ranging from 1,018 to 1,263.⁴ During the same period Harris produced a total of 45 press releases.⁵ Given this disparity between the frequency of polling and the frequency of press releases, it should not be surprising that the data cited in a typical Harris release were less than ideally current. We looked at the length of time between the last day of polling and the date of the press release for 67 Harris Poll and Gallup Poll stories between 1 January and 9 June. The Harris stories referred to polls conducted, on average, 15.3 days earlier; the Gallup stories referred to polls conducted, on average, 7.4 days earlier.⁶ Only 20% of the Harris stories reported data within 5 days of the last polling; the comparable figure for the Gallup Poll was 70%. In short, the Harris Poll was often reporting data that were two or more weeks old in a political world where the accuracy of surveys is highly (and negatively) correlated with the amount of time between the survey and the election (Crespi, 1988:167).

Moreover, some of the Harris Poll stories had lead paragraphs or headlines that implied the data were current when they were actually

3. We exclude from Table 2 an additional series of 12 state exit polls conducted in Super Tuesday states by CBS News only; these were presumably used during election night coverage to help "call" individual primary outcomes, but we had neither the data themselves nor any other record of their use.

4. Numbers of registered voters and breakdowns by party were not printed on the Harris press releases. However, the information is publicly available from the Harris Poll organization.

5. The releases contain both weekly commentary and weekly polling reports. We did not differentiate between the two because the format and content of the releases was the same for both types of press release.

6. The median length between final polling and release was 13 days for the Harris Polls and 4 days for the Gallup Polls.

Table 3. Level of Statistical Analysis in Poll Stories

	Gallup	CBS/NTY	Harris
Narrative only ^a	0%	0%	33%
Univariate analysis			
Frequency ^b	18	0	22
Subgroup frequency ^c	5	0	36
Bivariate analysis			
Longitudinal frequency ^d	18	8	7
Zero-order cross-tab ^e	27	72	0
Trivariate analysis			
Longitudinal cross-tab ^f	14	12	2
First-order cross-tab ^g	18	8	0
Correlation/regression ^h	0	0	0
	100%	100%	100%
<i>N</i>	22	25	45

^a No tabular data included in press release.
^b Frequency distribution of a single variable.
^c Frequency distribution within a subgroup of the sample (e.g., preference distribution among Republicans).
^d Frequency distributions for a single variable compared at two or more points in time.
^e Cross-tabulation with a single explanatory variable (e.g., vote preference among liberals, moderates, and conservatives).
^f “Zero-order” cross-tabulations compared for two or more points in time.
^g Cross-tabulations with control variables other than time.
^h Correlation or regression coefficients.

several weeks old. On 3 March, five days before Super Tuesday, Harris released a report headlined: “Negative Vote Pivotal in Super Tuesday Balloting.” The headline explicitly indicated that the poll had relevance for the upcoming Super Tuesday primaries. But the survey on which the report was based was a national survey conducted immediately after the New Hampshire primary. These data were appropriate for measuring the national “bounce” Dukakis and Bush received from their victories in the Granite State, and were used that way in two previous Harris releases. But they told us little about Super Tuesday—certainly less than was already available from weekly tracking of opinion in state polls in the Super Tuesday states.

The lengthy period between polling and use of the data in the case of the Harris Poll is apparently due to a scarcity of data rather than to any special sophistication of analysis. Table 3 shows the level of statistical sophistication employed in reports of results from the Harris,

Gallup, and CBS News/*New York Times* polls. The Harris Poll syndicated column relied on narrative with no tabular presentation of data at all in one out of every three press releases. By contrast, the Gallup Poll always provided marginals, and presented at least one cross-tabulation (with a demographic variable, party, time, or some other explanatory variable) in half its releases. The most common analysis of the CBS News/*New York Times* data compared the cell frequencies of cross-tabulations of an explanatory variable specific to a particular survey (i.e., not demographics, party, or time, which are found in all combine surveys). None of the poll stories of the three polling agencies in our analysis used descriptive statistics such as means or medians, not to mention correlation or regression coefficients, to describe their data.

The Early Line: Measuring Favorability

Campaigns for the presidency now begin a year or more before the first caucuses and primaries. The pollsters become involved as best they can, diligently tapping public opinion long before most of the public has given the campaign anything more than minimal thought. The chief visible product of this preseason polling is a pecking order of first choice support for each party's nomination. Who is the front runner? Who are the major challengers? But these early readings reflect name recognition more than potential support in a real campaign setting. A large fraction of the electorate typically reports being undecided, and whatever preferences are expressed are notoriously volatile. The addition or subtraction of a well-known fence sitter (Ted Kennedy, Mario Cuomo) can scramble the results, while relative unknowns may later emerge from nowhere ("an asterisk in the polls") to win the nomination.

These limitations have prompted many pollsters to supplement reports of first-choice support with additional information intended to provide a more valid fix on each candidate's latent electoral potential. In 1988 Gallup tried a variety of approaches: a question inviting each respondent to designate a second choice for the nomination from the full list of candidates, a question probing for "strong opposition" to any of the candidates, and (most frequently) a question asking whether respondents supported their first choice "strongly or only moderately."

The CBS News/*New York Times* polls relied throughout the campaign on a separate measure of favorable and unfavorable impressions of each candidate. This format has the disadvantage of requiring a separate question for each candidate. But it has the more-than-

Table 4. Favorability Ratings and First Choices Among Democrats in CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Season Polls

	January		February		March	
	Favorable	Support	Favorable	Support	Favorable	Support
Dukakis	74	6%	79	21%	76	29%
Jackson	54	17	50	13	57	22
Gore	61	4	39	8	51	14
Gephardt	57	4	63	12	34	8
Simon	73	9	44	6	39	6
Hart	42	23	24	10	n.a.	n.a.
Babbitt	54	2	n.a.	1	n.a.	n.a.
Other, none, DK		35		30		22
		100%		100%		100%

SAMPLE: Registered voters who “usually vote or are likely to vote this year” in a primary or caucus of the candidate’s party.

NOTES: “Favorable” entries are percentages of favorable ratings among all favorable and unfavorable ratings for each candidate; “undecided” and “haven’t heard enough to have an opinion” responses are ignored in calculating these percentages. “Support” entries are percentages of first choice support.

compensating advantage of providing candidate-specific readings relatively independent of the composition of the field of candidates as a whole. In addition, the ratings measure how much the public knows about each candidate (by comparing the number of favorable plus unfavorable responses to the number who are undecided or who “haven’t heard enough to have an opinion”), as well as the balance of favorable and unfavorable responses among those who do have an opinion.

The potential value of such a format, especially in the early stages of a crowded and relatively undefined race, is illustrated in Table 4, which compares the favorability ratings and first choice support of the Democratic candidates in 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* polls. The candidates are listed in order of their standings in the March preference poll. But there is virtually no correspondence between preferences in March and January; Dukakis went from fourth place in January to first place in March, Hart went from first place to no place, and so on. (For connoisseurs of statistical wizardry, the proportion of intercandidate variance in March preference standings accounted for by January preference standings is less than 1%—.007.) By contrast, favorability ratings were both more stable over time (except for candidates, like Hart in February and Gephardt and Simon in March, who had all but dropped out of the race) and more strongly related to the candidates’

Table 5. Balance of Favorable and Unfavorable Ratings of Candidates in Early CBS News/*New York Times* National Polls

	Oct 1987	Nov 1987	Dec 1987	Jan 1988	Average
Bush	84	83	n.a.	80/76	81
Dole	86	81	n.a.	83/67	79
Kemp	62	55	n.a.	69	62
Robertson	16	21	n.a.	23	20
Dukakis	70	64	86	74	73
Simon	70	65	66	73	68
Gephardt	67	47	58	57	57
Gore	68	45	50	61	56
Jackson	38	43	46	54	45
Hart	n.a.	n.a.	59	42/34	45
Babbitt	40	25	33	54	38

SAMPLE: Registered voters who “usually vote or are likely to vote this year” in a primary or caucus of the candidate’s party.

NOTES: Entries are percentages of favorable ratings among all favorable and unfavorable ratings for each candidate; “undecided” and “haven’t heard enough to have an opinion” responses are ignored in calculating these percentages. Second January entries for Bush, Dole, and Hart are from the special *New York Times* “Bush/Rather Survey” conducted 30–31 January 1988.

eventual preference standings in March. As early as January, a ranking of Democratic candidates by the proportion of favorable impressions would have had Dukakis first, Hart last (in spite of his lead in the January preference poll), and Gephardt and Gore in the middle of the pack.⁷

Table 5 shows the balance of favorable and unfavorable ratings in CBS News/*New York Times* polls for Republican and Democratic candidates from October 1987 through January 1988. Even in this earliest phase of the public campaign the favorability ratings were reasonably good predictors of the candidates’ performances in the spring. On the Republican side Bush and Dole were ahead but fading, with Dole fading faster than Bush. On the Democratic side Dukakis was first, with Babbitt last, Hart low and dropping steadily, and Jackson gaining steadily. (We look more closely at the Jackson case later in this review.)

7. The favorability ratings shown in Tables 4 and 5 were computed from percentages reported in CBS News press releases; calculations based on raw data would produce slightly different ratings by avoiding rounding error.

The 1988 primary season had plenty of surprises in store, even for a careful follower of these early favorability results—but not nearly as many as for someone focusing on the more highly publicized “horse race” numbers in the early preference polls. If one aim of the pollsters and poll interpreters is to reduce our quadrennial sense of surprise at the events of the presidential nominating process, greater emphasis upon (and more thorough analysis of) early favorability data might help to achieve that aim.

The Accuracy of Preprimary Polls

Political pollsters like to say that a poll result is not a prediction, but merely a “snapshot” of voter preferences at a specific time some days or weeks before an election. This becoming modesty notwithstanding, public pollsters’ salaries are paid directly by media executives (and indirectly by readers and listeners) whose interest in election polls rests squarely on the belief that polls predict what will happen on election day.

Then too, pollsters have not hesitated to boast when their “snapshots” of public opinion did turn out to be accurate predictors of actual election results. A *New York Times* article about the accuracy of the polls began:

After some embarrassing findings in the Presidential primary season, newspapers came about as close as polling specialists believe is possible to forecasting the results of Tuesday’s election.

That success has not silenced the debate over how much polling is too much; news organizations conducted nearly three times as many national surveys this year as in the 1984 general election. . . .

“The pollsters certainly did a strong job this time,” said Everett Ladd, director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. (Rosenthal, 1988:17)

Thus, the pollsters themselves suggest that the correspondence between poll results and actual election outcomes is an appropriate criterion for evaluating election season polls.

As we have already seen, neither Harris nor the CBS News/*New York Times* combine was heavily involved in preprimary polling in specific states during the 1988 campaign. That role was left to the Gallup Organization, which did conduct preprimary (or pre-caucus) polls in eight key states: Iowa, New Hampshire, Florida, Massachusetts, Texas, New York, Ohio, and California. How accurate were these preprimary polls as forecasts of the primary outcomes?

The answer to that simple-sounding question is complicated by Gallup’s production of three distinct sets of poll results in each state. Early

polls conducted from three to five weeks before each primary produced one set of results, late polls conducted over the weekend preceding each primary produced a second set of results, and subsamples of “most likely voters” drawn from the late polls in each state produced a third set of results.⁸ In Table 6 we summarize the discrepancies between each of these three distinct sets of poll results and the actual primary results.

The average absolute (unsigned) error in predicting Bush’s and Dukakis’s vote percentages from the full sample of respondents “intending to vote” in late Gallup polls in the 12 primaries and caucuses represented in Table 6 was 5.9 percentage points. Discrepancies of this magnitude are somewhat larger than would be expected simply on the basis of sampling error; nevertheless, they seem quite respectable given “the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion” (a standard industry disclaimer) plus the peculiar complications and volatility of primary season polling.

Among respondents judged “most likely to vote” the corresponding average absolute error for the same 12 state polls was even smaller, about 4.3 percentage points. It appears from this result that Gallup’s efforts to identify likely voters were more than sufficiently successful to outweigh their costs in terms of reduced sample size.⁹ The corresponding errors for the earlier preprimary polls were somewhat larger, averaging about 7.6 percentage points. Even these results seem quite respectable given the amount of time between the polls and the primaries (from three to five weeks) and the markedly smaller sample sizes in Gallup’s early preprimary polls.¹⁰

In addition to showing the average *absolute* errors for Gallup’s preprimary polls, Table 6 also shows the average *signed* error for each candidate. From these results it appears that Gallup systematically overestimated support for Robert Dole (by averages of 2.0, 3.4, and 2.8 percentage points in the three sets of poll results) while underestimating support for Pat Robertson (by from 4.5 to 5.6 percentage points) and Jesse Jackson (by from 4.3 to 6.4 percentage points).

Both Robertson and Jackson drew heavily from relatively poor rural

8. Gallup made no attempt to identify “most likely voters” in the early preprimary polls. The organization’s own analyses of the late polls attached varying degrees of emphasis to the results based on all respondents “planning to vote” and those based on respondents “most likely to vote.”

9. The average errors shown in Table 6 are based on average sample sizes of 1,069 for respondents “planning” to vote and 540 for respondents “most likely” to vote; Gallup’s methods for selecting “most likely” voters (never clearly documented in the press releases) thus involved cutting effective sample sizes nearly in half.

10. The average sample sizes were 1,069 in the 12 late polls and 484 in the 12 early polls included in Table 6. In theory, that difference alone would make the expected average errors in the early polls about 50% greater than those in the later polls.

Table 6. Accuracy of Gallup’s Preprimary Polls

	Average Absolute Error	Average Signed Error
Early Preprimary Polls: Respondents “Planning” to Vote		
Bush (<i>N</i> = 5) ^a	7.4	− 3.1
Dole (<i>N</i> = 5)	4.8	+ 2.8
Robertson (<i>N</i> = 5)	5.8	− 5.6
Dukakis (<i>N</i> = 8) ^b	7.6	− 4.7
Jackson (<i>N</i> = 8)	6.4	− 6.4
Bush/Dukakis (<i>N</i> = 12) ^c	7.6	− 4.9
Late Preprimary Polls: Respondents “Planning” to Vote		
Bush (<i>N</i> = 5)	5.9	− 2.5
Dole (<i>N</i> = 5)	3.0	+ 2.0
Robertson (<i>N</i> = 5)	5.1	− 4.7
Dukakis (<i>N</i> = 8)	5.5	− 0.8
Jackson (<i>N</i> = 8)	5.5	− 5.5
Bush/Dukakis (<i>N</i> = 12)	5.9	− 1.8
Late Preprimary Polls: Respondents “Most Likely” to Vote		
Bush (<i>N</i> = 5)	3.3	− 2.7
Dole (<i>N</i> = 5)	4.7	+ 3.4
Robertson (<i>N</i> = 5)	5.1	− 4.5
Dukakis (<i>N</i> = 7) ^d	5.3	− 1.1
Jackson (<i>N</i> = 7)	4.3	− 4.3
Bush/Dukakis (<i>N</i> = 12)	4.3	− 1.8

^a States in which Gallup reported Republican preprimary poll results included Iowa, New Hampshire, Florida, Massachusetts, and Texas.

^b States in which Gallup reported Democratic preprimary poll results included Iowa, New Hampshire, Florida, Massachusetts, Texas, New York, Ohio, and California.

^c To facilitate comparison across types of polls, California primary poll results are excluded from Bush/Dukakis summary calculations.

^d No subsample results for “most likely” voters were reported from Gallup’s late preprimary poll in California.

constituencies in which survey sampling is especially difficult.¹¹ Thus, some of Gallup's undercounting of these candidates' support is presumably due to the fact that their supporters simply failed to turn up in the Gallup sample in proportion to their numbers. Robertson and Jackson also both claimed special strength among voters who were not part of the traditional electorate; such voters are presumably most likely to be written off as unlikely to vote.

The undercounting of Robertson and Jackson's support has some methodological implications beyond the findings of these particular surveys. Widely used survey techniques, such as random digit dialing, cluster sampling, or reweighting to reflect a "probable electorate" can misrepresent the support of candidates whose constituencies are especially sensitive to any bias created by these techniques. Even careful demographic weighting is unlikely to recreate the opinions that are missed in an unrepresentative sample.¹² In the 1988 primary campaign, support for Robertson and Jackson was probably that sort of opinion.

Tracking the Race: The Case of New Hampshire

For the pollsters, the most embarrassing episode of the 1988 primary season was George Bush's remarkable comeback in the final days of the New Hampshire primary campaign. Bush had led Robert Dole by margins approaching 2 to 1 in the month before the primary. But his lead evaporated after Dole's victory (and Bush's third-place finish) in the much-publicized Iowa caucuses. Most late polls in New Hampshire had Dole even with Bush or pulling away. None forecast a clear Bush victory. But Bush did win clearly, by more than nine percentage points. At least one pollster was fired from a national account for having had things so wrong. "I've studied data from thousands of elections," another pollster told Paul Taylor (1988:15) of the *Washington Post*. "This is the most unique finish I've ever seen."

Both the Gallup Organization and CBS News conducted tracking polls during the final week of the New Hampshire primary campaign. Thus, the campaign's unexpected finish provides an interesting opportunity to assess each organization's results—and each organization's

11. For example, 29.2% of households with incomes below \$5,000 had no telephone in 1985–86; 15.6% (19.9% in the South) of black households had no telephone. Obviously, telephone surveys omit these people. See Thornberry and Massey, 1988:34–35.

12. Others have noted that "a poststratification realignment by age, sex, and education will not align the telephone population very well by race and region." These were, of course, two important variables in Jackson's strength. See Massey and Botman, 1988: 160. However, also see Mitofsky, 1981.

interpretation of those results—in a treacherously volatile and politically crucial setting.

The results of the CBS News polls in New Hampshire, together with excerpts from the polling operation's interpretations of those results, are shown in Table 7. CBS News conducted a total of five separate polls in the week between the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, the last conducted on the Sunday and Monday before the primary (14 and 15 February) and released for use on the network's Tuesday morning news show. The cumulative Republican sample size for these five polls was 1,964.

The Gallup organization polled from Friday (12 February) through Sunday (14 February). Preliminary results based on 993 Republicans interviewed Friday and Saturday were released for publication in newspapers Monday morning, and cumulative results based on 1,531 Republicans interviewed through Sunday were released as an update for publication on Tuesday morning. The daily results (included in the second release), plus excerpts from the Gallup/CONUS interpretation included with each release, are shown in Table 8.

One crucial difference between the CBS News and Gallup polls is evident from a comparison of the raw percentages in Tables 7 and 8. CBS News never had Bush trailing Dole by more than three percentage points throughout the week before the primary, and its final poll on Sunday and Monday had Bush pulling out to a four-percentage-point lead. Gallup had Dole ahead by eight to nine percentage points (among “likely voters”) all week long, with little sign of movement from day to day. Which organization “had it right” early in the week is, of course, impossible to say. But CBS News was clearly much closer to the mark later in the week, where the inevitable benchmark of success is an accurate forecast of the actual primary outcome.

Ironically, given what turned out to be better data, CBS News produced “in house” analyses of those data that were noticeably more circumspect than the corresponding “in house” analyses of the Gallup data.¹³ The main thrust of the CBS News analysis throughout the week, which we have attempted to convey with brief excerpts in Table 7, was that the race was “too close to call.” When Bush emerged with a four-point lead in the final round of polling, the CBS News analysis emphasized the slimness of that lead and the fact that it was based on seemingly “soft” support. By contrast, the first post-Iowa Gallup/CONUS report announced a “statistically significant” Dole lead, and subsequent reports emphasized the stability of that lead from day to day: the main impression conveyed by these reports was one of a

13. Here we refer to the Gallup/CONUS analyses produced by Larry Hugick and Andy Kohut which were provided to us for evaluation.

Table 7. Republican Horse Race in New Hampshire in CBS News Tracking Polls

Dates	Bush	Dole	N	Commentary
25–30 Jan	42%	20%	513	“Bush has a two to one lead. . . . Most Republicans say they could change their minds between the interview and election day, but over half of Bush’s supporters say their minds are made up.”
9–10 Feb	35%	27%	543	“In the two days after the [Iowa] caucuses, Bush’s lead has dropped to only eight points. . . . In the current poll, Bush’s lead narrowed by a significant margin between Tuesday and Wednesday.”
10–11 Feb	29%	32%	499	“George Bush is no longer the frontrunner in New Hampshire. Interviews . . . now show a race between Bob Dole and George Bush that is too close to call. . . . CBS News’ continuing New Hampshire polling clearly indicates Bush’s support declining and Dole’s rising.”
12–13 Feb	30%	31%	594	“still locked in a tight race . . . virtually no change.”
13–14 Feb	32%	31%	588	“still locked in a head-to-head confrontation . . . support for each frontrunning candidate is about equal.”
14–15 Feb	34%	30%	596	“still in a close race . . . Bush’s slim lead is within the margin of error and comes entirely from those . . . who say they will ‘probably vote’ in the Republican primary. Among those who say they will ‘definitely vote’ in the primary, Bush gets 31% and Dole gets 31%.”
16 Feb	37.6%	28.4%	157,625	

Table 8. Republican Horse Race in New Hampshire in Gallup Polls

Dates	Bush	Dole	N	Commentary
8–10 Jan	38%	23%	545	“Bush outdistances his closest GOP rival, Bob Dole, by almost a two-to-one margin. . . . Bush support is both wide and deep. . . . The ‘Iowa effect’ on the race, of course, cannot be factored into the results.”
12–13 Feb	28%	33%	993	“The wide lead Vice President Bush held over Senator Bob Dole among New Hampshire primary voters one month ago is gone. . . . Dole now leads over Bush (36% to 28%) among most likely Republican primary voters. The lead is statistically significant.”
	28%	36%	589 ^a	
12–14 Feb	27%	35%	902 ^a	“Sunday’s interviewing finds no significant change in candidate preferences among New Hampshire voters most likely to participate in Tuesday’s Republican presidential primary. Based on all likely GOP primary voters interviewed by Gallup Friday through Sunday, Bob Dole leads George Bush by a margin of 35% to 27%. . . . The daily trend in candidate support provides no evidence of any late movement in the GOP race.”
12 Feb	27%	35%	321 ^a	
13 Feb	29%	38%	265 ^a	
14 Feb	25%	33%	315 ^a	
16 Feb	37.6%	28.4%	157,625	

^a Likely voters.

sudden and seemingly irreversible shift to Dole following his Iowa triumph.

The Gallup/CONUS analysis of “strong” and “not strong” support did reveal some of the vulnerability of Dole’s lead:

Although Dole continues to hold a significant lead over Bush, Dole’s support remains less firm than his rival’s. The majority of likely voters who support Bush strongly back his candidacy compared with fewer than half of Dole’s supporters. To maintain his advantage and win on Tuesday, Dole must hold on to his less committed supporters.

Of course, that is what Dole failed, in the event, to do. But neither the Gallup organization's own poll results nor the (Gallup/CONUS) interpretation provided grounds for anticipating that failure.

So far we have examined only an "in house" analysis of the Gallup Organization's New Hampshire data. But working journalists' use of those data represents another, and perhaps more consequential, product of the polling enterprise. We focus here, more or less at random, on a front-page story by Jerry Roberts in the 15 February edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a story headlined "Gallup Poll Says Dole Leads in New Hampshire."¹⁴ "One day before the nationally watched New Hampshire primary," Roberts wrote,

Dole leads Bush 36 percent to 28 percent among Republicans considered most likely to vote, according to the Gallup Organization survey. . . . The new survey mirrors two other New Hampshire polls released yesterday, by the Boston Globe and the Washington Post-ABC. . . . Both polls also showed Dole leading Bush, but by small margins that were statistically insignificant. Dole's lead in the Gallup Poll, however, is statistically significant.

Roberts's story illustrates several important features of the way working journalists often use poll results. Taken together, these practices tended in this instance (as they do more generally) to exaggerate both the certainty and the political significance of the poll results on which the story was based:

1. Roberts followed the Gallup/CONUS press release's lead in focusing on Dole's more dramatic eight-point lead among "likely voters"; indeed, Roberts's story made only passing reference to Dole's smaller five-point lead in the larger sample. The accompanying table included both margins, but misreported the former as being based on registered voters and the latter as being based on those planning to vote in the primary (thus exaggerating the apparent change in Bush's fortunes since January).
2. Roberts's story read as though Dole's lead existed on the day of publication—"one day before" the primary. At that point the data on which the story was based were two to three days old. Roberts buttressed the Gallup results by citing congruent data from other surveys—surveys also released on 14 February but conducted earlier.
3. Roberts referred to the Gallup results as being "statistically significant," but he included no discussion of what that meant,

14. Roberts's story happened to be near to hand. Our assumption, though we have no systematic evidence to support it, is that similar examples could have been drawn from almost any major newspaper's coverage of almost any important primary.

or of the possibility that the advertised “margins of error of 3 percent to 5 percent” might understate the actual uncertainty of the results in a volatile primary setting.

4. A cautionary sentence indicating that “Dole’s support is not as firm as that of Bush” appeared as the sixteenth paragraph of Roberts’s story, far below the description of the “breathtaking suddenness” of “Bush’s nose dive.” As is often the case in journalism, clarification and qualification were not allowed to intrude significantly upon a clear, compelling storyline.

The combined effect of these several seemingly insignificant journalistic decisions was to obscure for the general reader of Roberts’s story the (already deemphasized) elements of uncertainty in the original Gallup/CONUS analysis, and thus to increase rather than decrease the potential for surprise in the next day’s primary result.¹⁵

Breaking New Ground: The Case of Jesse Jackson

The candidacy of Jesse Jackson, another surprise for political pundits in 1988, created special problems for the media and pollsters. There was simply no precedent, no baseline, no history for comparison. Jackson was the first black candidate with a chance to gain a major political party’s nomination for president.

Until early March the press seemed unaware of Jackson’s historic role. But a surprisingly strong showing in several Super Tuesday primaries, followed by another strong showing in the Illinois primary and then a startling victory in the Michigan caucuses, produced a second phase in the press and pollsters’ treatment of Jackson. He was recognized as a serious contender for the nomination. After Jackson lost New York his nomination once again became improbable, and the press and pollsters began a third phase of coverage centering primarily on speculation about the vice-presidential nomination and about Jackson’s future role in the Democratic party.

The three phases of Jackson’s candidacy are reflected in the questions asked by the polling agencies between January and June, some of which are shown in Table 9. In contrast to television news stories about Jackson’s 1984 bid for the presidency (see Broh, 1987), poll questions during the first phase in 1988 consistently included Jackson as part of the horse race. Throughout January and February, Gallup, Harris, and the CBS News/*New York Times* combine had Jesse Jackson as a response to their trial heats and exit polls. Standard survey

15. While the evidence here is clearly anecdotal, the pattern of reporting is consistent with content analyses from other presidential elections. See Broh, 1980.

Table 9. Three Phases of Jesse Jackson Poll Questions

Phase 1: Horse race and candidate assessment

Gallup: Regardless of which Democratic presidential candidate you happen to prefer, which one do you think cares most about people like yourself?

Harris: Let me read you a list of some people who have been mentioned as possible Democratic candidates for president in 1988. Who on that list do you feel you are not familiar with?

CBS/NYT: Who do you want the Democrats to nominate for President in 1988—Michael Dukakis, Dick Gephardt, Albert Gore, Gary Hart, Jesse Jackson, or Paul Simon? Is your mind made up, or is it still too early to say for sure?

Phase 2: “Assessing a contender”

Gallup: Is your opinion of Jesse Jackson very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?

Harris: Let me read you a list of some people who have been mentioned as possible Democratic candidates for president in 1988. Which people on that list do you feel you could not vote for if nominated for president in 1988?

Harris: Agree/Disagree: Because of his radical tendencies, it’s dangerous for a person like Jesse Jackson to get too much power.

Harris: Agree/Disagree: The country isn’t ready yet for a black to be president.

Harris: Agree/Disagree: There are real questions about how honest [Jesse Jackson] is on money matters and where his money is coming from.

Harris: Agree/Disagree: He makes more sense when he debates than most of the other candidates for president in both parties.

CBS/NYT: Regardless of which candidate you support for the nomination, which of these Democratic candidates do you think would have the *best chance of winning* the election in November if he were nominated—Michael Dukakis, Dick Gephardt, Albert Gore, Jesse Jackson, or Paul Simon?

Phase 3: Vice-presidency and future role

Gallup: If the November election were being held today and the Republican candidates were George Bush for president and Jack Kemp for vice president, while the Democratic candidates were Michael Dukakis for president and Jesse Jackson for vice president, who would you like to see win?

Harris: Now, on the Democratic side, most observers are convinced that Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts will win the Democratic nomination for president this July. Of the following people, which one would you prefer as your first choice for the Democratic candidate for Vice President to run with Governor Dukakis?

CBS/NYT: Do you think Jesse Jackson has too much influence on the Democratic party, not enough influence, or about the right amount of influence?

questions about handling the nation's problems, chances of winning, and caring about the voters also included Jackson in the wording.

But as in 1984, Jackson was largely unreported in the first phase of the 1988 primaries. For example, Jackson figured predominantly in only one press release of any agency—a Louis Harris (1988) essay (with no current data) about the “wild cards” in the election.¹⁶ Similarly, in the CBS News releases about Iowa and New Hampshire, Jackson's showing was either ignored or relegated to the last paragraph.

Super Tuesday changed the 1988 Democratic contest. Jackson won enough primaries for the press and pollsters to consider him a contender for the nomination.¹⁷ Meg Greenfield (1988) editorialized in *Newsweek* that anything less was racism, supporting David Broder's (1988) earlier editorial that the press had to change its reporting of Jackson. *Time* (Shapiro, 1988:21) and Dan Rather¹⁸ referred to Jackson during this phase as the “frontrunner” for the Democratic nomination. Pollsters responded.

Phase two of the Jackson campaign is best summarized as “assessing a contender.” Once Jackson was perceived as having a chance to win the nomination, however unlikely, he received the same rough treatment that serious challengers receive. From the pollsters' perspective, this meant measuring the positives and the negatives—the image makers' benchmark for success—and finding how many voters supported him—the politicians' benchmark for success. Table 9 displays typical question wording used by Gallup, Harris, and CBS News/*New York Times* in assessing the image of Jackson. Some of the questions were part of an index containing both positive and negative attributes; others were neutral in tone. Some were standard favorability and perceived voter strength questions. But all had the common characteristic of taking Jackson's image with voters very seriously.

A major use of exit polls during this period was to monitor Jackson's share of the white primary vote to evaluate his claim for support from

16. The general theme of this release was that Jesse Jackson, Gary Hart, and Pat Robertson could each have become “spoilers” within their respective political parties. While this early discussion recognized Jackson's importance in 1988, it did not treat him as a contender for the nomination. In general, the Harris organization looked at Jackson's image in more depth than either the Gallup organization or the CBS News/*New York Times* combine.

17. Jackson's victories, along with the victories of Michael Dukakis, in the Super Tuesday primaries provided an ironic twist to the nomination strategy devised by several Southern party leaders. The numerous southern states that agreed to hold their primary on the same day were supposed to form an attractive political arena for a conservative Democrat. Instead, the major beneficiaries of the day were the most liberal candidates. The Southern governors who devised the plan had forgotten that a large portion of Southern Democrats are black and that another large portion are more sensitive to national trends than to political ideology.

18. CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, 30 March 1988, 5:33 P.M.

many races—the so-called Rainbow Coalition. After receiving 7% of the white vote in CBS News/*New York Times* exit polls in the South on Super Tuesday and again in Illinois, Jackson received 23% of the white primary vote in the Wisconsin exit poll. A breakthrough? The *New York Times*'s analysis emphasized not the dramatic gain but the glass still three-quarters empty. In a 6 April article headlined "For Jackson, Good Will, But Not Enough Votes," R. W. Apple, Jr., announced that "the dominant finding" of the Wisconsin exit poll was that "the positive feelings of many" white voters "did not translate into votes for Mr. Jackson." Apple went on to conclude that "Mr. Jackson's failure to win here seems to suggest that he has little chance of winning in the big states still to be contested." The extent to which Apple's prophecy may have been self-fulfilling is impossible to establish, but it clearly was fulfilled: Jackson went on to average only 15% of the white vote (and almost 95% of the black vote) in the five subsequent CBS News and CBS News/*New York Times* exit polls.

Phase three was the demise of the Jackson campaign and subsequent events leading up to the nominating convention. Numerous questions, experiments, and analyses about the vice-presidency took place during this phase. The end of the primary season left open the role of Jesse Jackson in the Democratic convention or in a Michael Dukakis campaign or as the vice-presidential nominee. Pollsters used the tools of their trade to ponder these issues.

A late-April Gallup Poll focusing on the upcoming general election horse race provided the Dukakis campaign with ample reason to scratch Jackson as a possible vice-presidential nominee. In a trial heat Bush won over Dukakis 45% to 43%. But when Jesse Jackson was added to the Democratic ticket against Bush and Jack Kemp as the Republican vice-presidential nominee, the percentage difference was greater: Bush-Kemp beat Dukakis-Jackson 50% to 40%.

The Jackson "damage" to a Democratic ticket was a major news item that day. George Gallup, Jr., and Alec Gallup released their syndicated column with the headline "Dukakis Runs Neck and Neck with Bush but Falls Behind with Jackson as V.P." The *San Jose Mercury News*, a respected northern California daily, ran a story about the poll on page 1A with the following lead: "Jesse Jackson's presence in the vice presidential slot on the Democratic ticket would severely damage Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis' chances of winning the White House, according to a new Gallup Poll" (Hamilton, 1988). The wire services carried these results the day after the Gallup news release.

Jackson caused his team to lose the trial heat; that's bad press. But it is also bad experimental design. Gallup's experiment had two simultaneous manipulations. Thus, a second plausible interpretation of the

result is that Jack Kemp was a popular choice for vice-president, creating increased support for the Republican ticket. The survey design simply does not allow us to distinguish change attributable to Jackson on the Democratic ticket from change attributable to Kemp on the Republican ticket.¹⁹ The interpretation placed on the data by Gallup (and further emphasized in the *Mercury News* story) was the least flattering one from Jackson's perspective—and one that tended to obscure the traditional journalistic concern, Who is ahead?

The CBS News/*New York Times* poll had a better research design for testing vice-presidential candidates, and it demonstrated the weakness of a Democratic ticket with Jackson as vice-presidential nominee more convincingly than did Gallup. A trial heat question pitted Republicans George Bush and Governor Jim Thompson of Illinois against (1) Dukakis and Jackson, (2) Dukakis and Nunn, and (3) Dukakis and Glenn. Like Gallup's, this experiment had no control group for comparison, but, unlike Gallup's, the design did allow comparison of several concrete alternatives on the Democratic side.²⁰ The results suggested that the Dukakis-Jackson ticket would fare worst against the Bush-Thompson combination. That is, Dukakis-Jackson won by only 3% while Dukakis-Nunn, Dukakis-Glenn, or Dukakis alone won by 12%, 15%, and 10% respectively; the Dukakis-Jackson ticket would apparently have produced the closest race.²¹

Despite having a more convincing experimental design, the *New York Times* gave less prominence to the results of its vice-presidential experiment. Jackson's apparent effect on the trial heat results received

19. This methodology and question wording were not unique to the Gallup Poll. On 12 June 1988, The *Star-Ledger*/Eagleton Poll released a New Jersey poll with the headline "Dukakis Begins '88 Presidential Campaign with 14 Point Edge; Jackson Hurts Ticket in Jersey." The data showed 50% to 36%, Dukakis over Bush and 44% to 44%, Dukakis-Jackson tying Bush-Dole. Perhaps Bob Dole would have been a popular vice-presidential selection in the Garden State.

20. Ideally, one would cross-tabulate each experimental condition with a control group to determine the impact of the experimental condition. In the absence of a control group, one can only compare one experimental condition with every other experimental condition. A question pitting Bush-Thompson against Dukakis and "some other qualified candidate for vice president" might have provided a better control for the experiment. Then the distribution of support with each of the named alternatives in the Democratic vice-presidential spot could have been compared with the distribution of support with the unspecified alternative.

21. This result was by no means universal. A 30–31 March Roper poll showed that Dukakis-Jackson would win over Bush-Thompson 47% to 42%. With Albert Gore as the vice-presidential candidate or with no vice-presidential candidate mentioned, Dukakis and Bush were locked in a dead heat 45% to 44% and 43% to 44%, respectively. This poll received very little national coverage. A month later a Yankelovich poll showed that Dukakis-Jackson would win by the same margin, 47% to 42%. However, Dukakis alone or with Albert Gore won by larger margins, 50% to 39% and 49% to 39%, respectively. The *New York Times* ran an AP story about the poll with the daily election coverage: "Poll Gives Dukakis the Edge with Either Jackson or Gore," *New York Times*, 25 April 1988, B6.

cursory treatment in the last paragraph of an article emphasizing the Dukakis lead:

The survey found that with Mr. Jackson on the ticket, Mr. Dukakis's 10 point lead was cut to three points: Dukakis-Jackson got 45 percent; Bush-Thompson got 42 percent. On the other hand, Senator John Glenn of Ohio and to a lesser extent, Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, seemed to help Mr. Dukakis. The Dukakis-Nunn ticket defeated Bush-Thompson by 46 percent to 34 percent. The Dukakis-Glenn ticket beat Bush-Thompson by 49 percent to 34 percent. (Dionne, 1988)

While the Gallup and CBS News/*New York Times* polls gave Jackson's vice-presidential bid little encouragement, the Harris Poll did provide some support. In early May, the Harris Poll included a question about future voting behavior "if a black were nominated for vice president on the Democratic ticket." Voters who said they could not support a Democratic ticket with a black vice-president were predominantly Republican, while 40% of the registered black voters said they would be more likely to show up at the polls in November if a black vice-presidential candidate were on the ticket. Harris reasoned that the added black Democrats would offset any negative reaction against a black vice-president since those most strongly opposed would probably vote Republican anyway. The same Harris Poll also showed that Jesse Jackson was the plurality choice for vice-president among registered Democrats.²² He received 23% to John Glenn's 21% (and eventual nominee Lloyd Bentson's 6%).

Summary and Discussion

We began by asking how—and how well—pollsters dealt with the political complexity of the 1988 primary season. Perhaps not surprisingly, the complexity of the primary season itself makes for complex answers to such simple questions. Different pollsters did different things—and did different things well.

Gallup, Harris, and the CBS News/*New York Times* combine all conducted periodic national surveys during the primary season. These

22. The CBS/*New York Times* poll after primary season, between 20 June and 5 July, showed that Jesse Jackson was also the plurality choice among Democratic convention delegates. The *New York Times* ran a story in the politics section on 6 July 1988 with the headline "Jackson Runs 1st For the No. 2 Spot." Eighteen percent of the delegates answered "Jackson" to the question, "If Dukakis is nominated, whom do you think he should pick to run for Vice President?"

However, the *Times* poll also gave Michael Dukakis reason not to select Jackson. The percentage of delegates who said Dukakis would have an edge in their state fell from 67% to 33% when Jackson was added to the ticket; the percentage who said Bush would have an edge climbed from 9% to 37% when Jackson was added.

national polls varied in frequency and quality, as well as in the timeliness and sophistication with which they were publicized and interpreted. In general, they seem to have been most useful for establishing baselines early in the campaign season, as with the CBS News/*New York Times* combine's early readings on the favorability of the various candidates' images summarized in Tables 4 and 5. However, we were surprised by the relative infrequency of any sophisticated comparisons of data from these surveys over time, among regions, or with parallel data from individual primary states.

The Gallup Organization supplemented its national polling with a series of preprimary polls in eight key states. Those polls predicted the actual vote percentages for the leading candidates with sufficient accuracy to give both prospective primary voters and the national audience a reasonable picture of the strategic situation in most of the states where Gallup polled—but with sufficient error to leave considerable room for surprise in the closer, more volatile primaries.²³ Daily tracking polls seem especially likely to produce either boredom (if the result is clearcut) or confusion (if it is not), as Gallup—and Bob Dole—discovered in New Hampshire.²⁴

The CBS News/*New York Times* combine did extensive exit polling among primary voters in key states. Since the marginals in an exit poll are never newsworthy, this approach had the considerable advantage of focusing resources and attention on the tasks of explaining and interpreting each week's results.²⁵ Explanation and interpretation are especially crucial during the primary season, in part because of the sheer complexity and unfamiliarity of the process, but also because each week's results can have a significant impact not only upon the public at large but also upon prospective voters in subsequent weeks' primaries.²⁶

23. Recall from Table 6 that Gallup's average absolute errors for Bush and Dukakis were 7.6 percentage points in early polls (conducted three to five weeks before each primary) and 4.3 percentage points (for respondents deemed "most likely" to vote) in final polls (conducted the weekend before each primary). We also found that Gallup consistently underestimated support for Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson, in each case by about five percentage points.

24. We have seen that with media tracking polls, some of the confusion stems from the inevitable but often unacknowledged time lag between polling and publication. In general, tracking polls seem more useful for campaign planning (and in some instances, perhaps, for historical analysis by academics) than for campaign coverage by electronic or, especially, print media.

25. This is one explanation for the fact that so much of the analysis of the CBS News/*New York Times* polls involved cross-tabulations rather than marginal frequencies. Recall from Table 3 that the percentage of poll stories involving cross-tabular analysis of one kind or another was more than 90% for CBS News/*New York Times* surveys, about 60% for Gallup, and only 2% for Harris.

26. The impact of primary outcomes on subsequent campaign events is documented in Bartels, 1988. Analyses of poll effects more specifically include, for example, Beniger, 1976; Sudman, 1986; and Skalaban, 1988.

The pollsters' treatment of Jesse Jackson illustrates the importance of interpreting rather than simply reporting raw levels of candidate support. Unquestionably, Jackson evoked negative sentiment among a segment of the population. Some of this negative sentiment resulted from his political experience, policy positions, campaign statements, and acquaintances; but some of it was also due to "old fashioned racism" (McConahay, 1986).²⁷ Pollsters documented the negative image of Jackson, but they provided precious little of the information necessary to analyze or account for that image.²⁸

Conversely, pollsters helped to document and publicize the popularity of Michael Dukakis at a point in the campaign season when Dukakis was far from assured of the Democratic nomination. As with Jackson, we find ourselves wondering whether the polls contributed to Dukakis's emergence by telling people *why* he was popular, or simply by telling people *that* he was popular. The first enterprise is harder, and therefore rarer—but in our view more valuable.

Much of the tension inherent in the pollsters' role, in this as in other electoral settings, stems from the fact that their public is simultaneously a passive audience and an active citizenry. To the extent that pollsters focus on the "horse race"—who is ahead, who won the debate, who is losing ground—they may provide an exciting story while estranging the public from the real politics of the electoral process. Elections are supposed to be plebiscites on the parties, the issues, the candidates, and the management of government. The pollsters' fixation on the horse race helps to turn presidential selection into something more like a sporting event—a yearlong Kentucky Derby with citizens as the spectators.

Media coverage of the presidential nominating process sometimes suggests that the political significance of a primary or caucus is to be measured by its influence on the candidates' standings in the national opinion polls. The early events in Iowa and New Hampshire are considered important because the winners in those contests tend to rise in the polls and the losers tend to fall. It is as if voters in these and other states went to the polls to record their preferences in order to produce a "bounce" among 1,500 anonymous strangers—the respondents in the next week's poll. It would be well for pollsters and poll analysts alike to bear in mind that, for better or worse, poll results (and interpretations of those results) are not the end of the story. Polls are important

27. In a 1984 Gallup Poll, 23% of the population said they would not vote for a black candidate for president even if the candidate were "qualified." Presumably, these people's opinions would have been "unfavorable" or "very unfavorable" toward Jesse Jackson in 1988 when he emerged as a contender for the nomination. See Walters, 1988.
28. Some Harris questions of the sort shown in Table 9 were the most notable exception to this pattern.

because they, in turn, influence prospective voters. Presidents are still nominated and elected not *by* the polls, but *at* the polls.

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