

# POLLS AND PUBLIC OPINION

THE public opinion experts knew exactly who was going to win the recent American presidential election — but they were wrong, and all the polls, national, State and local, were caught out completely. The results have given a certain amount of amusement to those unaccustomed to the idea of polling, and many people are relaxing happily in this apparent confirmation of their conviction that public opinion cannot be measured in this way. However, though Gallup and his fellow workers may have been wrong, they have never yet been so wrong as those who fondly imagine that polls can now be safely ignored or regarded with tolerant amusement. Public opinion polls are here to stay.

There is nothing new in the attempt to see which way the political wind is blowing. The first "straw vote" was reported in the Harrisburg *Pennsylvanian* in 1824 in an attempt to predict who would succeed Monroe in the presidency "without Discrimination of Parties." With the realisation that what people were thinking had news value, polling gradually increased until by 1928 there were 85 straw polls (75 local) concerned with the prediction of the presidential election results. Apart from the polls run by a few large newspapers, the early polls tended to be theatrical, unreliable, badly organised and frequently dishonest. One poll stood out as a model. Since 1916 the *Literary Digest* had achieved a remarkable degree of accuracy in predicting election results by sending out questionnaires to people listed as owners of telephones or motor-cars. It was able to say, with some justification before the 1936 presidential election: "The *Digest* poll is still the Bible of millions." For the 1936 election, however, the *Literary Digest* was to have some new competitors using rather different methods involving careful statistical calculations which they had developed in the field of market research. The most important of these competitors were Crossley, of the Hearst newspapers, Roper, of the *Fortune* magazine,



PRESIDENT TRUMAN

"Prediction in any field implies that all other factors remain constant"

Written for "The Listener" by R. H. THURLOW THOMPSON, M.A., Department of Philosophy, Canterbury University College

money-back guarantee and had to watch the fate of his new venture hang in the balance. The result of the election was a complete vindication for Gallup and those who had adopted the new scientific methods of polling.

## Complex and Intricate

The principle underlying public opinion polling is simply this: "by sounding the opinions of a relatively small number of persons, proportionate to each major population group in every section of the country, the opinions of the whole population can be determined with a high degree of accuracy." In other words, a cross-section of the population is worked out, and on the basis of this cross-section public opinion can be sampled with the surety that the opinion expressed by the sample is representative of the opinion of the population as a whole. The working out of the cross-section and sample is an extremely complex matter. However, the framing of the questionnaire and the interviewing which are equally essential parts of the polling technique, are fraught to an even greater extent with delicate and intricate problems which are at the moment only partially understood.

Public opinion experts using this technique now conduct polls in many countries and manage to measure, to within some 3 per cent. of accuracy, the views of the electorate on current social and political questions. The high degree of accuracy achieved can be judged from the results of three of the main American polls in the past presidential elections. The table indicates the degree to which the polls miscalculated the division of votes, the figures showing the percentage error.

	ROPER (Fortune)	GALLUP CROSSLEY (AIPO) (Hearst)
1936	1.0	6.7 6.8
1940	0.5	(approx.) 3.0 1.8
1944	0.2	1.8 1.3

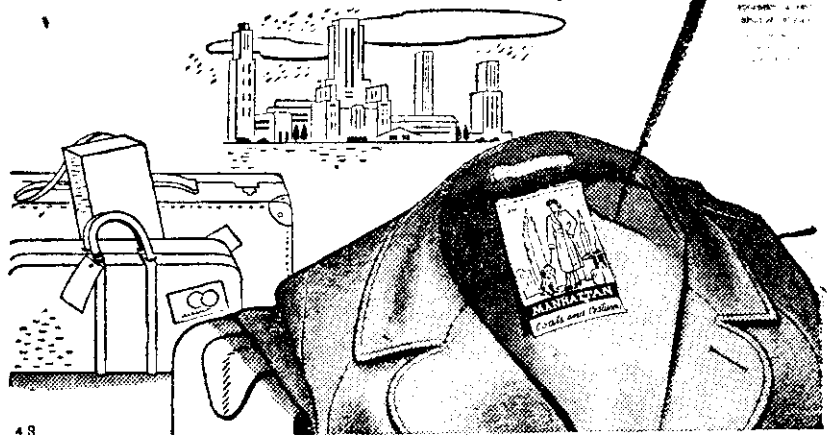
This record of accuracy has unfortunately led people to regard public opinion polls with a feeling almost of veneration, as being virtually infallible. The experts themselves, however, have been uncomfortably aware of the way in which their remarkably accurate predictions have covered a multitude of inaccuracies that only a great deal of research will eliminate. Roper's prediction, for example, in the 1940 presidential election, was apparently more accurate than that of Gallup, but his

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