



How important are polls?





- USING POLL DATA, THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE AND OTHER NEWS-PAPERS PRINTED EARLY EDITIONS ANNOUNCING THAT REPUBLICAN THOMAS DEWEY HAD DEFEATED THE INCUMBENT PRESIDENT, HARRY TRUMAN, IN 1948. WHEN TRUMAN WON WITH 303 ELECTORAL VOTES, HE HELD THE ERRONEOUS HEADLINE ALOFT AND TOLD REPORTERS, "THAT AIN'T THE WAY I HEARD IT!"

Though not part of the rules and laws governing elections, public opinion polls have become an important part of the electoral process. Many political candidates hire pollsters and take frequent polls. Polling informs political candidates of how well they are being perceived in relation to their competitors and what issues are uppermost in the minds of the voters. Newspapers, television and other media also conduct opinion polls and report the results (along with the results of private polls) to give citizens a sense of how their preferences for candidates, issues and policies stand in relation to the preferences of others.

Fifty years ago, only one or two large organizations dominated public opinion polling. *Today, in an era of instant news, the Internet and 24-hour cable-news channels, there are more polls, and more reporting and analysis of poll results.* While some polls represent state-of-the-art practices, others are hastily conducted and employ too-small sample sizes—and may have more value as entertainment than social science. Recent years have witnessed greater skepticism about the accuracy—and objectivity—of many polls, and at least two major polling companies have stopped “horse race”-type polling around presidential elections. Still, it is unlikely that candidates, the media or the general public will abandon polling or citing favorable poll results in the foreseeable future.