

4-9-1999

Trends. Warnings on Warnings About Polls

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1999) "Trends. Warnings on Warnings About Polls," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 14 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol6/iss14/6>

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Title: Trends. Warnings on Warnings About Polls

Author: Editor

Volume: 6

Issue: 14

Date: 1999-04-09

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Polls

The United States President and--to a lesser extent--his security advisors have been attacked by some political commentators for running a poll-driven foreign policy. The implication usually is that there should be a correct policy irrespective of what the people think. However, this implication itself is problematic.

First, in so far as a representative democracy can be characterized by a group of officials acting for the people, it seems reasonable that the officials should have some idea of what the people think. Second, complaints that poll results can seem to change quickly are not necessarily evidence that polls are wrong, but that people often can change their minds about many issues--especially ones on which they often have little direct contact even in an era of globalization. Third, attacks on the U.S. President for being a slavish follower of polls and for being driven by them is logically an attack on a purer form of democracy--so far as polls are accurate. (An alternative might be the U.S. Republican Party-led House of Representatives stance on polls during the Clinton impeachment hearings--viz., the people are irrelevant or can't be trusted.) Fourth, polling shortfalls related to slight changes in wording, timing, and sampling are certainly no more egregious than decisionmaking shortfalls involving organizational distortions, group dynamics, biased information processing, and so on. Fifth and finally, the notion that following the polls necessarily suggests an absence of determination, intelligence, wisdom, or a coherent sense of the world is propagandistic and illogical--especially given the positive features of obtaining and demonstrating domestic support for military intervention and other sensitive activities. A poll-driven President--and in his own way, wasn't Franklin Delano Roosevelt equally concerned about public opinion in events leading up to and during World War II?--may experience difficulties in foreign policy, but many of them may be independent of the polls. (See Heith, D.J. (1998). Staffing the White House public opinion apparatus: 1960-1988. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 62, 165-189; Kohut, A. (April 8, 1999). Beware of polls on the war. *The New York Times*, p. A27; Kuechler, M. (1998). The survey method: An indispensable tool for social science research everywhere? *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42, 178-200; Morwitz, V.G., & Pluzinski, C. (1996). Do polls reflect opinions or do opinions reflect polls? The impact of political polling on voters' expectations, preferences, and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23, 53-67.) (Keywords: Foreign Policy, Polls.)