

# The First Political Poll

June 18, 2002

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Pennsylvania is not known for innovations. But, perhaps, it should be. Indeed, the state has scored a notable number of political firsts across its more than 300-year history. First and foremost among these, of course, is being the place where the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the U.S. Constitution (1787) were drafted -- Philadelphia.

Pennsylvania was also the site of the nation's first capital (Philadelphia again, although both York and Lancaster served as temporary capitals during the Revolutionary War). And it was the first large state to join the new union. Tiny Delaware was the very first, ratifying the constitution just days ahead of Pennsylvania.

Some of Pennsylvania's firsts have not been so sanguine. In 1754, western Pennsylvania was the site of a brief battle between French and English colonial forces, headed by a youthful George Washington that precipitated the events that ultimately would lead to the American Revolution, but a battle that more immediately led to an unmitigated disaster for the English.

Then 40 years later, again in western Pennsylvania, the state was host to the first armed revolt against the federal government, the so called "Whiskey Rebellion," which was also the first tax protest faced by the United States. It was eventually put down by an army commanded by President George Washington (the first and last time a sitting U.S. President actually led military forces).

Not all of Pennsylvania's firsts have been political or military in nature. The state was the site of the first commercial radio station (KDKA in Pittsburgh), the first modern turnpike, the first drilled oil well (Titusville), and the beginnings of the cable television industry. The first computer (ENIAC) was also developed in Pennsylvania, and the list goes on.

One thing Pennsylvania is not known for, but should be, is the place where political polling started -- way back in 1824. In fact, it was the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian newspaper that is widely acknowledged to have conducted and then to have published a presidential preference poll. Strangely enough, the poll was conducted not in Pennsylvania but in Delaware.

The newspaper surveyed groups of citizens in Wilmington during July 1824, asking about their presidential favorites. The poll results were reported "without discrimination of findings," which was 19th-century-speak for honest results -- or as we might put it today, the publishers didn't "cook the data."

The year 1824 was an open seat election. President James Monroe was retiring, so there was no incumbent. The poll revealed military hero Andrew Jackson with a commanding 70 percent lead (335 votes) over Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (23 percent), Speaker of the House Henry Clay (four percent) and William Crawford (2 percent).

The newspaper's forecast of the Jackson popular vote victory was accurate if somewhat misleading. General Jackson did go on to win the popular vote in the fall election, beating his closest opponent, Adams, by 77,000

votes. But as Al Gore can now attest, winning the most popular vote isn't always enough in presidential elections. None of the candidates won a majority of electoral votes; hence the election was thrown into the House of Representatives -- where Jackson eventually lost to John Quincy Adams.

The type of poll conducted by the Harrisburg Pennsylvanian is known as a "straw poll" or more formally as a non-probability sample. Today, we are more familiar with polls that use statistically sound sampling methods, but it is largely forgotten how long the straw poll era lasted -- over 110 years from the Pennsylvania survey in 1824 to George Gallup's first national poll in 1936.

During the 100 years in question, straw polling was the only game in town, and it was pursued by hundreds of newspapers and magazines seeking to predict election outcomes. Some of the straw polls were uncannily accurate, others less so.

One of the most accurate straw polls for a while was the Literary Digest poll. It gained a wide following for its straw polls of presidential elections in the early 20th Century. The Digest's straw polling methods were based on the then-current belief that the bigger the sample, the more accurate the results.

During the last year (1936) the Digest polled, over 10 million questionnaires were mailed out, and over two million people responded. Compared to the roughly 1,500 or fewer people interviewed in a modern poll, two million respondents seem almost incalculable.

It was, however, with the 1936 poll that the Literary Digest's techniques became a symbol of flawed polling, and the Digest thereafter would have a special place in polling research infamy. Based on a sample of two million, the Digest confidently predicted that Pennsylvania native Republican Alf Landon, now a Kansan, would overwhelm Democrat Franklin Roosevelt.

Inconveniently both for the Digest and Alf Landon, Roosevelt easily won 46 of 48 states and 63 percent of the vote -- handing Landon one of the worst defeats in presidential election history. Landon, it is reported, felt bad, but he survived. The Digest didn't. It was lampooned mercilessly for its gaffe, and soon after ceased publication.

The failure of the Literary Digest straw poll is usually attributed to bad sampling techniques. The sample itself was self-selected. Some people who received questionnaires responded, but most did not. In addition, the sampling "frame" was biased; the mailings went to people who had 1936 auto registrations and who were listed in telephone books. In 1936, millions of Roosevelt supporters were too poor to have phones or own automobiles. So, sampling only people with cars or phones did not produce a cross section of likely voters.

The spectacular nature of the Literary Digest fiasco soon produced a demand for more scientific polls. Straw polls did not completely disappear. In reality, they are still conducted. But, they were soon relegated to the status they have today - chiefly valued for entertainment and amusement rather than for serious research.

Meanwhile, George Gallup and others were beginning to use random samples and scientific methods, and the survey research industry was born. But until 1936, straw polls were virtually the only form of polling done. And few people know, much less recall that it all started here in Pennsylvania.

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