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# Polling has become a form of disinformation

CHRISTOPHER Hitchens, the Anglo-American political writer, remarked recently that most information gathered by polling organizations is "rubbish collected by morons from morons." That's a bit harsh. Some pollsters are quite bright, and some of the people who give their views to strangers on the phone must be at least ordinarily intelligent. But it's surely true that the increase in opinion sampling during the past few years has produced an unprecedented blizzard of pseudo-scientific non-sense, all of it eagerly passed on by TV and the newspapers.

Polling has become a kind of social plague, an elaborate and expensive form of disinformation that obscures the subjects it pretends to illuminate. As a civil libertarian I'm vehemently opposed to the federal proposal to keep polls secret for 72 hours before an election, but if I could only ignore my principles on this issue I'd come up with a counter-proposal: ban all polling of all kinds at all times, everywhere. Think of the slogan: "A Poll-Free Canada In This Generation." It might do as much for the intellectual atmosphere as the anti-smoking laws do for the air.

What's wrong with polls? They can be posterously wrong, of course, as the British election last April demonstrated, but that's the least of their faults. Even when they're "right" (when a sample accurately reflects what the whole population would say if the whole population were asked), there's less to them than meets the eye. I have recently read that eight out of 10 Americans believe they will be called before God on Judgment Day, 81 per cent of Canadian college women say their boyfriends verbally abuse them, and three out of four Americans think the media should pay less attention to the personal lives of politicians. The Judgment Day business (it appears in Gary Wills' recent book on politics and religion) is a typical anti-fact – an apparent fact that leaves you more ignorant than you were before you obtained it. It would be extremely interesting to know

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that most Americans conduct their lives in the belief that they will have to explain themselves one day to God. In theory, that could even be true. But it's more likely that many respondents hadn't thought about the matter in decades and gave that answer because it sounded right. The trouble with polls on that sort of subject is that the poll-taker on the phone has no way to ask, "Do you mean that?"

Totalling up the complaints of the college women about their boyfriends was equally useless: that's the sort of question which can't be intelligently or usefully quantified. It was silly of the sociologists involved to raise it, and sillier still (as one of them has acknowledged) to broadcast such a pointless number. And the Americans who said the media should ignore the private lives of politicians were (it seems likely) trying to impress the poll-takers with their piety. Certainly there's no evidence that people turn off TV when the subject of a politician's sex life comes up. Polls like those should come with a warning for consumers: when you know this, you know nothing.

A recent academic study, *The British General Election of 1992*, by David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, says that John Major's majority victory was "the Waterloo of the polls." That's wildly optimistic, I'm afraid. They won't be stopped. If anything, failure only encourages the pollsters, it gives them something to chuckle about, proves they're human. Their patrons in politics and the media aren't bothered either. They just resolve to hire better pollsters next time.

Nor is the polling industry much disturbed by the evidence of widespread lying. If you ask Americans whether they have registered to vote, about three-quarters of them say they have, though in fact only about two-thirds ever get around to it. That means

about nine out of every 100 are liars. Well, perhaps "liars" overstates it. Is lying to a stranger who asks questions on the phone the same thing as lying to a friend? My guess is that most people don't think so, though I haven't commissioned a poll on that point. I imagine that people regard pollsters as pests who deserve to be fooled. And of course people want to sound like good citizens, and shrewd voters as well. Last fall an American poll discovered that certain people who didn't in fact vote for Bill Clinton had changed their minds and a week later decided, on second thought, that they had. In Colorado, polls taken before the election indicated that the anti-homosexual-rights measure would be defeated. When it won, it became clear that a fair number of voters told the poll takers one thing and did another.

Nevertheless, journalism's love affair with opinion polling hasn't abated. Many journalists, in fact, now appear to believe that what matters is not what happens in the world but how people feel about it. They're so intoxicated by polling that sometimes they prominently display opinion stories that mean literally nothing: the word "poll" switches on an automatic pilot in the editors' brains. On March 8 the headline at the top of page one of *The Toronto Star* said, "Women get raw deal, pollsters told." The first paragraph explained, "More Canadians think women are getting a raw deal in this country..." The story said that 56 per cent of a recent national sample by Gallup claimed that men have unfair advantages over women, whereas in 1989 only 54 per cent held that opinion and in 1986 the equivalent figure was 53. The news, apparently, was a measurable change in public perception. But then the last paragraph said that the sample "is accurate within a 3.1 percentage point margin of error....." In other words, the two changes were inside the margin of error, therefore meaningless. An appropriate headline would have been: No news from Gallup this week.

The article EM9324 reprinted above is used in Figure 8.15a of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Figure 2.8a of the STAT 332 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #79.