Why Did Dewey Beat Truman in the Pre-election Polls of 1948?

On election night in 1948, like many other people, I attended to the media later and later, and finally about 1:30 a.m. I abandoned hope of a decision and went to bed. Next morning we found that Harry Truman had defeated Thomas Dewey for the presidency of the United States, contrary to all the media wisdom. More important from a statistical point of view, the media had been continuously and confidently informed by the various polling organizations (such as Crossley, Gallup, and Roper) that Dewey would be the winner. These events led to my participation in a large social science study of pre-election polling.

For a short time, it seemed all right to me that experts should be taken down a peg or two, but that view did not last. Samuel A. Stouffer, the sociologist who encouraged bringing me to Harvard, regarded sample surveys as a pre-eminent tool of the social sciences, comparable in value if not in precision to the microscope for the biologist or the telescope for the astronomer. Consequently he felt that a major mistaken forecast using sample surveys was not merely a joke for newspaper columnists but a catastrophe requiring careful scientific investigation and, unlike most research, that an investigation had to be made immediately if useful information was to be recovered. Sam kept saying, “Fred, I wish you could come and help with this, but I suppose you have classes.” He well knew what classes I had. Sam met at once with James B. Conant, formerly a chemist, then president of Harvard University, who said, “This reminds me of an explosion in a chemical laboratory. It doesn’t stop research, but it makes a terrible mess and takes a long time to clean up.”

Although the Literary Digest had made a grave error in forecasting the outcome of the Roosevelt-Landon election in 1936, the nation had come to believe that pre-election forecasting now had a sound scientific basis and could be expected to be correct. By 1948, opinion polling was widely used for marketing work, and at the Bureau of the Census, researchers such as Morris Hansen, William Hurwitz, and William Madow had impressively advanced the theory and practice of sample surveys. Although opinion polling was a research field and the problems of sampling and interviewing were being studied, most
people were not aware of the difficulties of opinion and pre-election polling, over and above those encountered in making unambiguous measurements from members of samples drawn from a well-defined population of objects, like the population of buildings over 20 stories tall.

Organizing

Among the problems were: some people would not respond; others would, but incorrectly; the interviewer could influence the answer; some people had no opinion; and people changed their minds. (Gallup read aloud a letter sent to him by a regretful respondent to his poll, apologizing for having changed his mind in the voting booth after reporting his intention to the Gallup interviewer. The respondent sincerely regretted that he personally had caused the error in forecasting.) Rensis Likert at the Survey Research Center at Michigan, Hadley Cantril at Princeton University, and Paul Lazarsfeld in the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University were among those who were trying to carry out research in opinion polling in addition to groups in the government, especially the Bureau of the Census.

Rumors flew that many groups of social scientists were planning to inquire into the reasons for the 1948 error in forecasting. A key organization whose purpose was to plan and promote research in social fields was the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), consisting then of seven associated social science organizations.¹

In 1948, each associated organization had 3 members on the Board of Directors; some additional Board members were chosen at large, and some members of the staff such as the president were also Board members. Most of SSRC’s research work was carried out by committees with the aid of a small staff. When social scientists saw clear needs for innovation, especially of an interdisciplinary sort, they often turned to SSRC for aid in developing the new topic. Foundations cooperated with SSRC in supporting such developments. Often foundations liked to have SSRC handle fellowship and educational programs that they funded. Thus SSRC was a facilitator and catalyst without substantial funds of its own. At this time, the president was Pendleton Herring, a political scientist.

The Social Science Research Council and the National Research Council had a joint Committee on Measurement of Opinion, Attitudes and Consumer Wants (chaired by Samuel A. Stouffer). This Committee had been carrying out research on sampling, on the effect of interviewers on expression of attitudes and opinions, and studies of panel methods of interviewing (the same people serve as respondents in several successive surveys). One concern about the election forecasting error was that, unless some authoritative group launched a serious study of what had happened in the 1948 surveys, all studies of opinions and attitudes would fall into disrepute.

The exact order of activities would be hard to establish from any record. Stouffer always used the long-distance phone incessantly and wrote letters