

Sending a Message or Staying Mum

How Newspapers Write about Public Opinion in Non-Election Years

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ABSTRACT: Research on representation has shown that elected officials often look to newspapers to divine public opinion on issues of the day. The goal of this paper is to examine what elected officials might be taking away about public opinion when they rely on newspapers in this manner. Do they get detailed information about public preferences, or do they get vague stories about what “polls show”? How often are opportunities to learn about public opinion from newspapers available? In non-election years, are most stories about public opinion still about elections that are months –if not years – away? Under what conditions are poll results discussed as “sending a message” to politicians? Scholars have evaluated the quality of newspaper coverage of polling techniques (i.e., do they report the margin of error) and of polling during election campaigns (i.e., do they focus on the horse race or on the issues). To our knowledge, only one study has explicitly evaluated newspaper coverage of polls outside of the context of an election, yet that study is nearly 30 years old. Using a content analysis of two American newspapers in 2007, we examine the questions listed above. The study offers both pessimistic and optimistic conclusions. On the one hand, election-related poll stories dominate coverage of public opinion. And officials concerned with national issues are better served by poll-related stories than state and local officials. On the other hand, many salient national issues are covered in detail with some regularity, and when stories on state and local issues appear, they are often issue-based. Finally, poll numbers are often presented in context, noting whether the current results represent change or continuity.

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Sending a Message or Staying Mum:

How Newspapers Write about Public Opinion in Non-Election Years

Research on representation has shown that public officials often look to the media to divine public opinion on issues of the day (Herbst 1993; Powlick 1995; Geer 1996; Herbst 1998; Pew Research Center for People and the Press 1998; Kull and Ramsay 2002). These officials look at op-eds, letters to the editor, and editorial decisions about which stories to cover as indicators of what the public cares about and what its preferences are. As Powlick discovered when he interviewed foreign policy officials about their sources for public opinion, “public attitudes [are] often thought to be reflected in the tone and intensity of news coverage” (Powlick 1995, p. 434). But officials also likely examine coverage of polls because such coverage is one of the most obvious ways in which newspapers can tell a story to their readers about what Americans believe at any point in time. Moreover, the media do not only report on polls; most major newspapers and television news outlets also conduct their own polls. The frequency of such polling has amounted roughly to one poll per month in recent years. As a result, articles that refer to polling are likely to infiltrate, if not dominate, stories about public affairs with some regularity.¹

In most models of representative democracy, elected officials monitor public opinion and use it as one of several considerations when crafting policy (e.g. Pitkin 1967; Fenno 1978; Mezey 2008). Scholars interested in the relationship between public opinion and representation should therefore examine what kind of portrait of public opinion officials might be getting when they rely on newspapers as a key source of their information about public attitudes. The analysis

¹ The *New York Times* Polls Index shows that the newspaper conducted over 12 polls per year since at least 2003 (http://www.nytimes.com/ref/us/polls_index.html, accessed on July 23, 2009). The *Washington Post* online poll archive shows 19 polls for 2007, 11 for 2009, and 6 as of this writing in 2009 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/politics/polls/?nid=roll_polls, accessed on July 23, 2009).

presented in this paper provides a critical assessment of the opportunities and limitations of relying on newspapers to determine public opinion, with particular attention devoted to coverage of polls. Questions examined include: How often are opportunities to learn about public opinion poll results from newspapers available? Can readers get detailed information about public preferences, or do they get vague stories about what “polls show”? In non-election years, do most stories about public opinion continue to focus on elections that are months – if not years – away? Are officials who deal with national and international affairs – who are likely to have enough resources to occasionally conduct their own polls – better able to find relevant information about public opinion in the media than officials who deal with state and local issues – who often lack resources to do their own polling and might be more in need of the media as a tool to cultivate the link between leaders and constituents? How often do journalists place poll results in context? In other words, do they tell readers if the results signify continuity or change, or are results presented in a vacuum? And how often do journalists suggest that the results imply that the public wants to “send a message” to public officials?

Public opinion and political communication scholars have evaluated the quality of media coverage of polling *techniques* (i.e., do they report the margin of error, the response rate, etc.) and of article *content* regarding polls during *election campaigns* (i.e., do they focus on the horserace or on issues) (e.g. Smith and Verrall 1985; Larson 1999; Alsina, Davies, and Gronbeck 2001; Larson 2003). These studies generally find that there is much room for improvement in the extent to which the media address both methodology and substantive issues. But to our knowledge, only one study has explicitly evaluated the quality of newspaper coverage of polls outside of the context of an election, and that study is now nearly 30 years old (Paletz et al. 1980). In the present analysis, we update and expand upon that study. We concentrate on a non-

election year since our primary interest regards what officials know about public opinion on *issues*. This interest derives from the central role that such leader-constituent linkages play in models of representative democracy. Since coverage of polling in election years is likely to be dominated by polls about candidates, we assumed that a non-election year would provide a better opportunity to investigate the questions listed above.

For this investigation, we conducted a content analysis of two American newspapers in 2007. We find reasons for both pessimism and optimism. On the pessimistic side, election-related poll stories dominate coverage of public opinion, even 10 to 12 months before any votes are cast in New Hampshire. We also find that officials concerned with national issues are better served by poll-related stories than state and local officials, despite the fact that state and local officials might be more in need of the media as a source of information about public opinion than officials in national politics. On the optimistic side, many salient national issues are covered in detail with some regularity, and when stories on state and local topics appear (putting aside presidential primaries), they are more likely to be issue-based than election-based. Finally, poll numbers are often presented in context, noting whether the current results represent change or continuity.

Public officials, the media, and public opinion

While it was certainly the case that public officials looked to the media and to editorial choices about content to gain insights into public opinion before the advent of polling (Herbst 1993; Geer 1996), research confirms that public officials continue to do so. A 1998 study found that three-fourths of presidential appointees and 84% of members of the Senior Executive Service cited the media as their primary source of public opinion (Pew Research Center for

People and the Press 1998). In some cases, the use of the media as a proxy for public opinion can lead to severe misperceptions of what the public actually desires (Kull and Ramsay 2002). Many officials interviewed in these studies admit they are wary or distrustful of public opinion polls given that wording can affect the results, that polls often fail to reflect the intensity of opinion, and their general perception that the public is simply erratic and ill-informed (Powlick 1995; Herbst 1998). They go on to argue that the media in general represents a crystallization of public opinion and that journalists are more in touch with what average Americans care about than they are. If an issue gets media attention, officials say, then the public probably cares about it.

Yet there are several reasons to concentrate the current analysis on news stories about poll results in particular. First, given the prominence of poll results in media coverage (after all, *new* results from a *new* poll give beat reporters something *new* to discuss), it is hard to believe that explicit media coverage of public opinion does not factor into how officials use the media as a way to assess public opinion. Second, since many news outlets conduct their own polls, the mere decision to devote resources to polling and the decisions about which questions to ask are also likely indicators of editorial assessments of what the public wants to read. Regardless of what the actual results show, if a newspaper uses its precious resources to conduct a poll on whether evolution should be taught in science classes, then officials who rely on the media as a guide to the American mind can only conclude that the editors are confident that the public wants to read about this issue. And as anyone who has designed a survey knows, keeping the length of a survey short is important; tough decisions must be made about which questions to include. So the actual questions that appear in media surveys are also indicators of what the editors think public debates are about.

Third, despite qualitative studies showing that policy makers disregard poll numbers, a 2001 survey of policy leaders by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) found that 78% agree (strongly or somewhat) that “public opinion polling is far from perfect, but it is one of the best means we have for communicating what the public is thinking” (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001). In that same study, a plurality of public officials (46%) said that polls are “the best way for officials to learn about what the majority of people think about important issues.” Other response options to this question besides polls were to hold a town meeting, to talk to people who contact their office, or to talk to people on the street and in shopping malls. Polls outperformed each of these options when officials were asked for “the best” way to learn what the public wants.

Finally, Americans *want* to be consulted for their views when leaders make policy decisions, and they think that polls should be an important tool that officials use. The KFF study mentioned above paired its survey of policy leaders with a survey of the American public. That portion of the study found that a majority of Americans felt policymakers should pay “a great deal” of attention to polls on education, health care, and social issues, and a plurality felt the same about economic and foreign policy issues. Similarly, a 1985 survey by the Roper Organization found that 75% of Americans think that polls work in the public’s interest (Roper 1986).

In a more nuanced study, Dran and Hildreth used a split sample design and asked one half of their respondents, “when elected officials decide how to vote on important issues, do you think they should pay the *most* attention to: the people who are most active about an issue; or the opinion of the majority; or their own knowledge and conscience?” (emphasis added). The other half was asked a question that replaced “opinion of the majority” with “public opinion polls” (in

a follow-up study, the first half was asked about “what citizens think” instead of about “the opinion of the majority,” with no effect on the results). They found that although people were more likely to favor “the opinion of the majority” and “what citizens think” than “polls,” a plurality consistently chose one of these options as the *most* important consideration for elected officials to consider rather than activists or the legislator’s own knowledge or conscience. This finding held up even when respondents were asked about specific issues like taxes and abortion (that it held for abortion is especially noteworthy since that is a classic values issue where conscience looms large). Since many elected officials do not conduct their own polls with regularity (Herbst 1993; Herbst 1998; Kull and Ramsay 2002), media polls – or media coverage of polls – might be their only regular opportunity to use polling on policy issues to help them identify what their constituents want and thus attempt to fulfill the leader-constituent relationship that the public desires. As Manza and Cook note, “poll results often only have significance to the extent that they are noticed by the media” (Manza and Cook 2002, p. 655).²

Existing studies of the media and polls

Existing studies that examine how the media discusses polling focus almost exclusively on election years. This research highlights the prominent role of horserace coverage relative to substantive issues. It also uncovers the extent to which the media provides – or rather fails to provide – detailed information about the nature of the poll, such as the margin of error (Broh 1980; Miller and Hurd 1982; e.g. Smith and Verrall 1985; Larson 1999; Alsina, Davies, and Gronbeck 2001; Lewis 2001; Welch 2002; Larson 2003). One study, for instance, found that

² One critique of our approach might emerge from the work of Justin Lewis, which finds that media coverage of public opinion tends to concentrate on those opinions that are in line with the policy approaches that elites are already pursuing; poll results are less likely to be covered if they go against the elite grain. Thus, Lewis might argue that elites who look to media coverage of polls to assess public opinion are essentially looking in the mirror (Lewis 2001).

only 55% of stories about specific polls on network news during the 2000 presidential election included the margin of error in their reporting (Larson 2003). Even worse, almost a majority of the stories were actually inaccurate by either stating that one candidate was ahead even though the margin of error suggested a possible tie or by suggesting that the margin of error suggested a tie when it did not. As Larson concludes, “these inaccurate reports revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of what *plus or minus* means” (emphasis is original, p. 66).

Our main interest lies less with the coverage of polling mechanisms but rather with the concept of representation. In short, we are concerned with the extent to which public officials can broadly and deeply engage with public opinion about public policy while using news coverage as one of their main sources of information about public opinion. As such, it is important for us to look at what happens in between elections when, ostensibly, media stories about public opinion might be more likely to focus on issues rather than on a horserace.

We found only one study that deliberately looks at non-election years. In 1980, Paletz and colleagues looked at how polls were discussed in the *New York Times* and in two network news broadcasts for the years 1973, 1975, and 1977 (Paletz et al. 1980). That study was particularly concerned with the differences between print and broadcast coverage of polls (they found few), not our main interest here. It also examined topics that election-year studies tend to address: whether the source of the poll was identified, whether the methodology was explained, etc. (they found that coverage was inadequate).

Yet this study also examined questions that concern us here: how often do readers have an opportunity to learn about public opinion from media coverage; and do elections dominate stories about polls, even in non-election years? Regarding the first question, Paletz and colleagues found that the *New York Times* printed a poll-related story roughly every 3 days in

non-election years, indicating that the opportunities to learn about attitudes from the newspaper were potentially substantial. On the second question, they found that election-related stories still appeared regularly – accounting for about 8% of all polling stories, potentially diminishing the opportunity for officials to learn about the public’s preferences on actual policy matters. Moreover, they argue that the policy-related poll stories were superficial, avoiding the complicated realities and tradeoffs that leaders actually face. They concluded that, “the flawed public opinion polls presently purveyed by the media are inappropriate guides for public policy” (Paletz et al. 1980, p. 511).

From the standpoint of representative democracy, one is thus left with the conclusion that it is troubling for officials to rely on the media as their primary source of information about public opinion. If they look to stories that *are not* about polls, then they miss out on empirical realities. And if they do look to such stories, the available information is scarce and lacks depth. But do Paletz’s findings hold true today? Are officials who use the media as a tool to discern public opinion better off looking at editorials or at the subjects that the editors deem worthy of front-page status? Are newspapers perpetually concerned about elections? Is issue-based coverage meager and acontextual? These and other questions are examined below.

Data collection

We conducted a content analysis of the *New York Times* (a national newspaper) and the *Boston Globe* (a state/local paper) for all of 2007 (a non-election year). Articles included in the content analysis were identified through a Lexis-Nexis search for the terms “poll” or “survey” and “public opinion.”³ Only news items about public opinion polls in the United States were

³ An initial search of just “poll” or “survey” brought too many irrelevant hits; “public opinion” was added to rule out stories where the words “poll” or “survey” were mentioned but had nothing to do with public opinion polls.

included in the database; opinion pieces and letters to the editor were excluded, as were stories about public opinion polls in foreign countries. Articles with only the most cursory mentions of general polls were also excluded since the goal was to isolate articles that described particular polls. For example, an article that primarily focused on John McCain's changing campaign strategy provided context using a polling reference: "at a time when he was already hemorrhaging in public opinion polls..." (Nagourney 2007). This article was not included in the data set. In short, we concentrated on articles where results from public opinion polls were a key part of the story. In the end, a large portion of articles that fit the initial Lexis-Nexis search criteria were discarded for this reason.

For each article that was included in the final database, coding tracked whether the reference was to a specific poll or to general statements about what polls show. For instance, an article about John Kerry's decision not to run for president in 2008 cited his poor standing in the polls at more than one point in the article. This article was coded as referring to generic polls (Klein 2007). Some articles referenced more than one specific poll, or one specific poll and also referenced generic "polls," and this was noted as well. Information on each poll's sample population and the poll topic was recorded. Unless the sample population was explicitly identified in the article, the population was marked as unknown (the full coding instructions can be found in the Appendix). Polls were marked as falling into the category of public versus non-public affairs (i.e. travel, films), elections, the economy, the Iraq war and related issues, healthcare and related issues, immigration, presidential approval, approval of other officials (such as governors or particular members of Congress), approval of particular institutions, crime, energy, science, education, religion, racial issues, or sexual-orientation issues. Since our study aimed to investigate what type of portrait of public opinion elected officials might get if they rely

on newspapers to communicate such information, each article was also coded for the extent to which it discussed public opinion over time. Specifically, it was noted whether an article suggested change or continuity of public opinion. Each article was also coded for whether or not it suggested that the poll data indicate that the public was trying to “send a message” to elected officials.⁴

Key findings

Overview

A total of 142 articles fit our criteria for inclusion in the study. The *New York Times* covered polling more extensively than the *Boston Globe* (97 stories vs. 45). This number is similar to the number found in the 1980 Paletz study. That study found roughly 125 stories per year in the *New York Times*, and it used search criteria nearly identical to ours, such as omitting opinion pieces and pieces that only mentioned polls in passing (we also omitted polls conducted outside the United States; they did not). Given the advances in polling technology since the 1970s, it is noteworthy, and perhaps surprising, that our number of cases is not higher than theirs. That said, 97 stories in one year is still a lot, translating into one every 3.7 days for the *Times*. The rate for the *Globe* is about one per week. Thus, looking just at frequency it seems that officials potentially have many opportunities to learn details about public opinion if they primarily rely on major newspapers as their main source of information.

The number of poll-related stories was relatively constant throughout 2007, with most months having between 11 and 15 stories. August and November were the comparatively slower months, with 7 and 9 stories, respectively. No month saw more than 15 stories. Thirty-four of the

⁴ Intercoder reliability for a subset of articles using the final coding scheme was 91%.

Times' 97 stories referred to polls that the *Times* conducted itself.⁵ Five of the *Globe*'s 45 stories referred to polls conducted by the *Globe*. In nearly half of the stories (45.8%), the specific sample was never identified. It was often implied that it was a national adult sample, but it was not stated explicitly. The *Times* was more likely to omit this information than the *Globe* (49.5% vs. 37.8%). When a sample was identified, the most common samples were national adult (17.5%) and state or local (19.6%). As will be discussed more below, many of the state and local surveys pertained to the 2008 presidential primaries.

Fourteen stories, or nearly 10%, only refer to generic polls (8 of them were in the *Globe*).⁶ Generic poll statements included phrases like “a recent poll showed...” and “public opinion opposes...”. Thus, well over a majority of the time, actual numbers accompany reporting about polls. This finding reinforces that there is potential for elected officials to actually discern many useful details about public opinion when relying on newspaper coverage as their main source of information.

Elections dominate

Yet this optimism dissipates when the analysis examines the *content* of articles about polling. While the overall number of poll articles we found was not higher than the 1980 study, both the number and rate of election-related polls was *substantially* higher. Only 8% of stories in the 1980 study were election-related, which translates to roughly 10 per non-election year in that analysis, whereas we found 33 election-related stories in the *New York Times* and 24 in the

⁵ Note this does not mean that the *Times* conducted 35 polls in 2007, since more than one story can refer to the same poll.

⁶ Forty stories, or 28%, mention generic polls in addition to referencing specific poll results.

Boston Globe (34% and 53%, respectively).⁷ Paletz's observation from 1980 is even more true today: "The press seems obsessed with presidential elections, willing to publish polls on the subject no matter how irrelevant or inane" (Paletz et al. 1980, p. 499).⁸

Table 1 shows the issue-based coding for the articles in the database. By far, elections were the most common category discussed in polls. Over 40% (n=60) of the articles mentioned a poll that was about an election, and all but 5 of them were about the presidential election. All but three of the sixty polls which referenced elections were *solely* about the election horserace, ignoring issues altogether to discuss instead which candidates were moving up and down in the public's esteem. Of the remaining 3, two (one of which was about a local election) were about the horserace *and* issues, and only 1 was *only* about issues (primarily Iraq). The overwhelming devotion to the horserace that we found in election-related stories in a non-election year is in line with findings from earlier studies of poll reporting during election years (e.g. Broh 1980; Alsina, Davies, and Gronbeck 2001).

[Table 1 About Here]

We purposely selected a non-election year for our study in order to minimize the dominance of election coverage over other issues. However, as both parties faced competitive primaries with a wide-open candidate field, it is perhaps not surprising that election-related poll coverage extended heavily into 2007. After all, the first primary of 2008 was held only three days into that year. Though perhaps not surprising, the prevalence of election coverage in a non-election year is in many ways problematic. The media and public's obsession with elections is

⁷ The proximity of Boston to New Hampshire should be noted when looking at this figure, since many voters in southern New Hampshire are exposed to the *Globe* (the *Globe North* section of the paper covers 37 towns in New Hampshire in addition to 57 towns in Massachusetts; http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/regional_editions/globe_north/, accessed on July 24, 2009). Note, however, that of all 45 of the *Globe*'s stories in the dataset, only 5 refer to polls conducted by the *Globe* itself. Of those, only two are of New Hampshire voters.

⁸ Also see Crespi (1980) for an early critique of the effect of the continual coverage of the horserace on presidential politics.

fed with a multitude of horserace polls starting months in advance of the first primary. Figure 1 shows the number of election-related articles in the two papers for each month of 2007. While there is a spike in December, the data show a relatively constant attention to the horserace over the entire year. Indeed, if we remove December from the analysis, we are still left with 50 election-related stories. And if we remove September through December, we are still left with 33, which represents 35.8% of all articles from January through August. In other words, election-related poll stories are a prominent feature of newspaper coverage of public opinion in 2007 *throughout the entire year*, not just in the weeks immediately prior to the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary. It is also worth noting that articles would often report the latest public opinion polls regarding primary candidates while simultaneously cautioning that similar polls had, in the past, proved of little predictive value. In short, it is difficult to find a time when the presidential horserace is *not* getting attention.

[Figure 1 About Here]

Table 1 also shows that a significant portion of the stories did not fit into any of our predetermined categories (see row labeled “other”). We discuss these stories shortly. For now, it is just important to note that six stories coded as “other” actually asked about traits that people see or would like to see in candidates for office. Three of these were not coded as election-related because they did not ask about a specific election; they asked about traits that people valued in politicians in general. But they are hardly about policy either. If these three stories are counted among the election-related articles, then the percentage of election-related articles increases to 44.3%.

Newspaper coverage is, to some extent, a zero-sum game. If an article on the latest primary poll makes the paper, another article may be left out. So while detailed poll stories

appear frequently, what officials who read these stories learn about often relates to far off elections and not to substantive policy issues.

Issues

Besides election coverage, the topics most discussed in polls were the Iraq war, the economy, presidential approval ratings (which often discussed issues as well, most often Iraq), and nonpublic affairs. Nonpublic affairs is a broad category that included polls relating to celebrities, sports, and other non-governmental topics. Institutional approval, which usually referred to the public's level of satisfaction with Congress, was another frequently polled topic. Healthcare and immigration also appeared frequently, at a rate of roughly one story per month. Other issues, such as race, crime, and energy, did not appear often. Thus, the most salient *national* issues of the day were indeed discussed with regularity.

As noted above, a significant portion of the stories (36.4%, n=46) did not fit into any of our predetermined categories. It turns out that many of them (n=25) were *also* coded as being about another issue in table 1, such as Iraq or elections. For instance, a March 2007 article about Bush's approval ratings also discussed attitudes about Iraq and about terrorism (Connelly 2007). This article was coded under presidential approval, Iraq, and "other" because there was not a separate category for terrorism. Of the 21 articles that were *only* coded as "other," 9 asked about strictly local issues, such expanding casino gambling in Massachusetts, 3 asked about traits people like to see in elected officials, and the rest were about truly "other" issues, such as Cuba and whether Americans purchase flood insurance. After reviewing the articles coded as "other," we determined that issue categories that would have been useful to include in our content analysis are: traits, terrorism, presidential primaries (in addition to our current code of whether

the election in question was simply presidential or state/local), other foreign policy besides Iraq (Iran, Cuba, etc), and whether the issue was strictly state/local versus national.

Important questions to consider at this point are: How much attention to a particular issue is enough? Should we be troubled that stories about attitudes on energy or science only get attention twice in the course of one year? How often should papers be discussing the public's views on these matters (in light of the fact that officials admittedly discern public opinion by looking at the media)? While these are key normative questions, they are ones that we cannot answer definitively. On the one hand, research shows that aggregate public opinion is often quite stable on issues over time (Page and Shapiro 1982; Page and Shapiro 1992). So perhaps once or twice per year is enough when it comes to asking people about global warming or support for investing in alternative energy sources. On the other hand, the more often policy-related stories appear, the more likely it is that officials will actually see them. After all, it is unlikely that they will read every story about the public that appears each day. Several will fall through the cracks. Moreover, if officials use stories about polls to discern the public mood (Herbst 1998), then detecting a trend over time (or lack thereof) can be very useful. Finally, the comparison of the rate of issue-based stories to the rate of horserace stories is still an unpleasant one, given the space constraints that editors face. If they (and their readers)⁹ were not so interested in who is ahead and who is behind in an election that is still ten months away, then perhaps the paper *might* devote more resources to covering how Americans feel about issues instead.

Change and sending a message

⁹ Herbst notes that officials she interviewed in Illinois reported that pre-election polls in the media were often more useful to them than issue-based polls (Herbst 1998).

Our study found that in 36.6% of the articles, the media made a point to track public opinion over time, discussing whether recent poll results suggested change or continuity (or, sometimes, both) in public opinion. If we exclude election horserace stories from this figure, the percentage increases to 40%. And of all stories discussed in this contextual manner, a strong majority (65%) is about issues and not about elections. For instance, one *Times* article discussed public opinion about the death penalty in New Jersey, and cited that support had decreased since the 1990s (Mansnerus 2007). And a March 2007 story in the *Times* on health care noted that the percentage of Americans who said it was the government's responsibility to guarantee health insurance to all Americans increased from 56% in 1996 to 64% today (Toner and Elder 2007). In light of our concern with the connection between reporting on polls and representative democracy, this relatively high level of context provided in issue-based stories of polls is encouraging. While 40% is not a majority, neither is it non-trivial. In many cases, officials who look to newspaper stories about public opinion to learn about attitudes learn not just about the recent numbers but also about how those numbers fit into ongoing trends.

Moreover, about 28% of the articles discussed the public opinion findings as sending a message to public officials. While this interpretation of the results is typically at the discretion of the journalist writing the article, it is exactly this kind of interpretation that might determine whether officials take the results seriously or not. Recall that officials interviewed in previous studies noted that they look to the totality of journalistic choices regarding media content to discern public opinion rather than to any single component. Poll numbers presented in an acontextual way might be less likely to get noticed or taken into account than poll numbers that are presented by the newspaper as sending a message. It turns out that many stories of "sending a message" were election-related (25%), with the journalist providing an interpretation of what the

horserace results mean. And in many “sending a message” stories, the “message” was conveyed by adding quotes from ordinary Americans to the end of an article, allowing respondents’ own words to illustrate the theme that the journalist wished to present. Thirty-five percent of the stories that used quotes from ordinary Americans were coded as sending a message.¹⁰

It is important to note, however, that public officials often consider monitoring the polls closely as a sign of weak leadership. As then-Vice President Dick Cheney (in)famously responded in 2008 when told that two-thirds of Americans believe the war in Iraq was not worth it: “So?” (Venkataraman and Brady 2008). In a similar vein, several articles included cases of officials purposely not following the public’s signs. For example, one poll showed that a majority of voters considered New Jersey Senator Frank Lautenberg too old to run for reelection. In response, Lautenberg vowed to continue his fight for the Senate seat (Smothers 2007).

Local versus national issues

In this final section, we examine whether national or state and local officials are better served by relying on poll coverage in newspapers to learn about public opinion. Forty of the 142 articles in our dataset have state or local samples, but only 17 of them (12% overall) are unrelated to elections; 8 from the *Times* and 9 from the *Globe*. It might be reasonable to expect that the *Globe* would have more state and local issues unrelated to elections than the *Times* given that the *Times* is essentially a national newspaper. Still, the number of local articles is low. Even though surveys have become more feasible to conduct over time, they are still expensive, and newspapers are in dire financial straits these days. Just as local-level officials are unable to

¹⁰ Overall, 9.8% of the stories in our database included quotes from respondents in follow-up interviews. This figure is nearly identical to the 9.1% found by Barabas and Gaskins in their study that looked at quotes in poll articles from 1979 to 2007, though they do suggest that the use of quotes has become more prevalent over time (Barabas and Gaskins 2008).

conduct their own opinion polls regularly, the same appears to be true of local papers. The result is that if local officials want to look to the media to assess public opinion, they are typically left to looking at headlines and the choices that editors make regarding which topics to put on their front pages. State and local officials simply do not get detailed factual information about their constituents from newspapers. The one silver lining we found is many of the non-election related local polls actually focused on substantive issues, such as whether to allow casinos, views of statewide healthcare reform in Massachusetts, the state budget, and education. As noted above, research shows that aggregate public opinion tends to be rather stable, so for these issues in particular, the coverage found here might be sufficient for informing state and local officials about constituent views. The problem is that the range of issues covered by the papers is so narrow.

Finally, when Herbst interviewed state-level elected officials in Illinois, they reported that they typically did not pay much attention to newspaper stories of poll results on state-level issues, mainly because papers rarely broke down their analysis by state-level electoral units (Herbst 1998). Local legislators are not interested in what citizens of the entire state think; they are interested in what their particular constituents think, and it is difficult to find newspaper coverage that discusses results in those terms. Some people she interviewed did, however, note that such polls can be useful for characterizing the general mood of the public.

To probe the opportunities of state and local officials to learn about the views of their constituents from newspapers more fully, a useful extension of the present study would be to replicate this analysis using a handful of strictly statewide papers from across the country and omitting national papers like the *Times*. In such an extension, it would be valuable to code if the results are primarily discussed in the aggregate or if results are broken down into categories that

local legislators might find useful, including demographic groups like race and gender in addition to electoral units.

Conclusion

The analysis was motivated by our normative concern with the relationship between citizens and public officials. The attitudes of the public are a key element of theories about the nature of representation, yet determining the public's attitudes is a constant challenge for those in positions of power. Research on how they go about meeting that challenge has consistently found that the media is an important source (if not the main source) of information for officials about public opinion. In light of these findings, our goal in this paper was to assess the breadth and depth of information about public opinion that this strategy provides, with a singular emphasis on how newspapers cover results from public opinion polls. Unlike most existing studies of this sort, we were not concerned with whether the media provides information about the mechanics of polling since our audience of interest – public officials – is typically somewhat poll savvy. Rather, our focus was on the range and content of substantive issues covered in poll reporting.

We sought to answer several questions about the scope of poll reporting in two major newspapers in a non-election year, and we emerge with both pessimistic and optimistic findings from the standpoint of representative democracy. On the optimistic side, the opportunities to learn about public opinion from the media are plentiful. The number of poll stories we found is not any higher than that found 30 years ago, but readers can nonetheless encounter several per week, especially if they look at more than one newspaper. Moreover, readers can often find detailed numbers being discussed rather than general statements about “what polls show.”

Attitudes about major national issues, such as Iraq, immigration, and healthcare, are reported regularly, and this reporting often notes whether the latest attitudes are similar to, or diverge from, those that were reported previously. As such, newspaper reporting on polling does indeed seem like it can be a useful source of information about public opinion for officials who work on national issues.

On the pessimistic side, the opportunities for state and local officials to learn about public opinion from the media appear to be much scarcer than the opportunities available to national officials. This is unfortunate given that state and local officials typically have fewer resources at their disposal for conducting their own systematic studies of constituent opinion than national officials. And even for national officials, the vast plurality of poll-related stories was about elections, and of those, the vast majority was solely about the horserace. In addition, the percentage of horserace stories per year has increased dramatically since the last similar study to ours was conducted. While officials might find this information useful for electoral purposes, it is arguably much less useful in forging a connection between officials and constituents when it comes to actual governance. Proportionally, what is being communicated about public opinion is less and less about policy and more and more about the horserace, even when a national election is not imminent. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to add to this study a year immediately *following* a presidential election, such as 2009, to account for the fact that the months in our study were immediately prior to the first presidential primaries and caucuses of 2008. Yet recall that even the early months of 2007 still saw high levels of election related-stories. Moreover, if looking at how policy opinions gets covered by the media is only possible in post-presidential election years, it would mean that journalists are only able to concentrate on actual policy issues when writing about public opinion in one out of every four years, a depressing picture indeed.

Despite flaws in polling, aggregate attitudes are often meaningful (Page and Shapiro 1992). Their collective results – more so than the results of any single poll at a single point in time – can provide accurate and detailed information about public opinion to elected officials. It should be something they consult – whether by conducting their own polls or by reading about poll results in the media. It should not be the only way they assess public opinion, but it should be a factor. Relying on the media absent polling has been shown to lead to flawed perceptions of public desires (Kull and Ramsay 2002). *When* the media covers polls about issues, our preliminary results suggest that they tend to do a good job, even when dealing with local issues. Normatively, then, our main desire is simply to see them do it more often.

Appendix: Coding scheme and instructions

INFORMATION ABOUT THE POLL

paper: 1 = NYTimes; 2 = Boston Globe

month: Numerical month article appeared

day: numerical day of the month article appeared

ownstory: 0 = AP or other wire/paper's story; 1 = paper's own story

ownpoll: 0 = no; 1 = yes; 2 = only mentions generic "polls" (variable applies to first non-generic poll mentioned in article).

otherpoll1: Is there another specific poll mentioned in the article? 0 = no; 1 = yes; 2 = mentions generic "polls" in addition to a single specific poll

otherpoll2: Is there a third specific poll mentioned in the article? 0 = no; 1 = yes; 2 = mentions generic "polls" in addition to two specific polls. If an article ONLY mentions generic "polls," *ownpoll* should be coded as "2", and *otherpoll1* and *otherpoll2* should be coded as "0".

sample: Refers to first specific poll mentioned. 0 = unclear; 1 = national adult; 2 = national likely voter; 3 = state or local sample; 4 = subset of population (ex; whites only, latinos only, union members, etc); 5 = national adult with oversample of a subset. If *ownpoll* = 2, then *sample* = 0.

othrsample1: Refers to poll referenced in *otherpoll1*. Coding same as for *sample*.

othrsample2: Refers to poll referenced in *otherpoll2*. Coding same as for *sample*.

oversamp: Refers to poll referenced in *ownpoll* only. 0 = blacks; 1 = Republicans; 2 = Democrats; 3 = regional; 4 = undecided voters

TOPIC AREAS: only code the topic if it is specifically discussed in relation to poll results. Do not code the topic if mentioned elsewhere in the article but not in relation to a poll.

nonpub: 0 = about public affairs; 1 = not about public affairs (ex: about sports, fashion, etc)

election: 0 = not about an election; 1 = about election horserace; 2 = about election issues; 3 = about both horserace and issues.

level: 0 = not about an election; 1 = about presidential election; 2 = about statewide election (gov or US senator); 3 = about local (mayor, US congress, etc)

econ: 0 = not about economy; 1 = about economy

Iraq: 0 = not about iraq; 1 = about iraq

health: 0 = not about healthcare; 1 = about healthcare

immig: 0 = not about immigration; 1 = about immigration

presapp: 0 = not about presidential approval; 1 = about presidential approval

persapp: 0 = not about approval of a specific person (not president); 1 = approval of specific person (ex: governor, member of congress)

instapp: 0 = not about approval of a political institution; 1 = approval of political institution (ex: Congress, Supreme Court)

crime: 0 = not about crime; 1 = about crime

energy: 0 = not about energy; 1 = about energy

science: 0 = not about science; 1 = about science (ex. environment, stem cell research, evolution)

education: 0 = not about education; 1 = about education

religion: 0 = not about religion; 1 = about religion

race: 0 = not about race; 1 = about race

gay: 0 = not about gay issues; 1 = about gay issues

other1: 0 = issue covered in other variables; 1 = other issue

other2: open ended: what was the main issue of the poll discussed in the article

ADDITIONAL VARIABLES

quotes: 0 = no quotes from respondents; 1 = quotes from respondents

change: 0 = findings not discussed in terms of change or continuity; 1 = article suggests that public opinion has "changed" (does it include reference to prior attitudes?); 2 = article suggests public opinion "continuity"; 3 = article discusses opinions in terms of both change and continuity

message: 0 = findings not discussed as "sending a message" to public officials; 1 = findings discussed as "sending a message" to public officials

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Table 1: Percentage of Articles Referencing Polls About Each Issue Type

<i>Issue type</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>
Elections	42.3	60
Other	32.4	46
Iraq	19.7	28
Economy	14.1	20
Nonpublic affairs	9.9	14
Presidential approval	9.9	14
Approval of institution	9.2	13
Healthcare	8.5	12
Immigration	7.0	10
Approval of other official	7.0	10
Sexual orientation	3.5	5
Education	2.8	4
Religion	2.8	4
Crime	2.1	3
Energy	1.4	2
Race	1.4	2
Science	1.4	2

Notes: Percentages do not sum to 100 because articles could be coded more than once.

Total # of articles = 142.

**Figure 1: Number of Election-related articles over time, 2007
(NYT and Boston Globe)**

