

## AAPOR Conference 2003

### Transcript of Arianna Huffington panel

**Jon Krosnick:** Thank you for coming to what I hope will be an engaging evening for all of us – an evening of exchange of ideas, and an opportunity for learning about topics we all care deeply about.

As you know, *Public Opinion Quarterly* is a crown jewel of which every person in this room can be very proud. Our association's quarterly journal has been a beacon of quality in which the academic literature of our field is deposited and has been since 1937. In case you haven't seen some of the new quantitative analyses of its stature in the social sciences, our journal ranked very high in visibility, impact, and prestige in multiple disciplines.

There are many important reasons for the excellence of *POQ*. But one of the most important can be summed up in a single word – criticism. Authors who submit articles to *POQ* work very hard to prepare their manuscripts for submission and ultimately believe the product they produce is ready for publication in the end. But 90% of those manuscripts are rejected on the first submission. The association selects a wise and experienced editor we trust, and he or she selects wise and experienced reviewers who read each submission, and the net result is usually a list of concerns and potential problems standing in the way of publication. When some authors get the editor's letter and see the long list of complaints, their first instinct is to denigrate the reviewers and the editor. [laughter] "How could they fail to recognize the superb quality of my work?!" [laughter] Obviously amateurs, or worse, experts with axes to grind." So these authors conclude the journal isn't worth the paper it's printed on, pack up their paper, and send it off immediately, unaltered, to a different journal.

In my view, that's a big mistake. It is not the responsibility of the editor or the reviewers to trust the well-meaning author or to give him or her the benefit of the doubt. It is the author's responsibility to write a paper that is convincing to the journal's readers. Editors and reviewers' opinions each represent the likely views of countless readers. So they show us what our critics would say of our paper if it were published as is. By hearing their criticisms, taking

responsibility for our failures to convince, and changing our papers responsively, we assure the value of our scholarship over the long haul. This is why *POQ* has so much impact throughout the social sciences and why so many people want to publish in the journal – criticism and respectful responsiveness to it. And this is why we as a field are grateful to the critics for helping each of us make our work better.

But let's face it: This is criticism given *to* people *within* our field *by* people *within* our profession to assure long-term impact of our work *within* our profession. But we do not do what we do merely for each other. We have a much grander purpose in mind, a much more ambitious goal: to enhance the quality of life in America and the rest of the world. That means that our audience is as much *outside* our profession as within.

Indeed, perhaps our most important audience *is* outside. For without them, without their confidence, without their trust in our work, our impact would be tiny indeed. In fact, we have the trust and confidence of many outside our field who spend literally billions of dollars every year on survey research to inform government policy-making, to inform business decision-making, and to inform the academy.

But that does not mean that our work is beyond criticism and that we need not listen to those who have different views than our own. In the same spirit that listening carefully to criticism by our peers helps make us better professionals, so does listening carefully to criticism by those outside our field.

Consider for a moment some such criticism.

“The numbers, as pollsters like to call them, have been all over the place since the war started. It's not worth citing any particular numbers from a few days ago since they probably did a back-flip yesterday evening depending on the news from the front lines. The overall trend has been toward volatility and away from subtleness. The public backs Bush, the public backs away from Bush. The public expects higher casualties, or doesn't. Lately what the polls seem to be demonstrating is their own pathetic inadequacy.”

Or another.

“The most serious concern of survey researchers is the growing number of people who refuse to participate in polls. The nonresponse rate for most surveys is higher than pollsters would like and the future looks even more grim. Low response rates greatly affect the validity of a survey.”

Or another.

“Once upon a time, politicians had to rely on their own sense of what was right and what was appealing to voters. Today, office-holders and candidates are all hooked up to IVs that continuously drip fresh poll data directly into their veins. [laughter] An entire industry has grown up to tell them what every demographic group thinks about every conceivable issue and how each segment of the electorate may be won over by tweaking the candidate’s message. But the November 5<sup>th</sup> election outcomes left pollsters resembling contestants trying to catch a greased pig with their quarry escaping and their faces splattered with mud.”

Or another.

“Polling has become a type of meat thermometer, but meat thermometers are more accurate. [laughter] We elect the president to lead us, not to follow meaningless polls.”

Or the last.

“If the politicians don’t know what you’re thinking, they might have to stop pandering and take a chance with the truth. So if a pollster calls you, lie your head off.” [laughter]

Not *one* of these quotes comes from our guest this evening. [laughter, applause] They come instead from a wide range of critics with various agendas and various perspectives, and they are not unique or unusual. These are the views we must deal with, we must listen to, and we must

respond to. In that light, I am very grateful to Arianna Huffington for agreeing to join us this evening.

Ms. Huffington is a nationally syndicated columnist and author of nine books. Originally from Greece, she was trained at Cambridge University in economics and was president of their debating society. Her books have explored the changing roles of women in contemporary society, the intersection of politics and culture, the power of myths, and she has written biographies of opera diva Maria Callas and painter Pablo Picasso. Her latest book is entitled *Pigs at the trough: How corporate greed and political corruption are undermining America*. She has appeared on television on Larry King Live, Nightline, Crossfire, Hardball, Good Morning America, The Today Show, and many more.

And Ms. Huffington is no stranger to surveys. Since 1996, she has published 671 columns in newspapers, and in a recent content analysis we did of these columns with two blind coders [laughter], we found that in 1 of every 14 columns, she has cited data from a survey to help support a substantive argument she made [inaudible, laughter, applause]. We are happy to have been so helpful!

But those are not the only mentions of polls in Arianna's columns. As you no doubt know, Ms. Huffington is concerned about the quality and reliability of survey data and about their impact on public discourse and policy-making in America. Having read all of her columns on the subject, I can see why she would be concerned with some aspects of our work. From an outside perspective, anyone who looks closely at what we do would have to be confronted by these very same apparent problems.

Many of us in the field believe we have strong and compelling answers to *all* of these concerns, and that things are not nearly as bleak as they may seem to those observers. But when I looked to see where we had written powerful, data-based responses to these criticisms of our work, I came up with almost nothing. I believe it is *our* responsibility to formulate those answers and to educate the public about them and about the value and validity of our work – not to ask the public to give us the benefit of the doubt or to do the investigative work themselves. I am

therefore very grateful to Arianna for agreeing to join us this evening to help us prepare to do that in an exchange of ideas in all directions grounded in her observations and her concerns. I am very grateful as well to our three discussants (whom I will introduce to you later), who have taken on the task of formulating responses to some of the key issues. After Ms. Huffington's presentation and the discussants' commentaries, we will open the floor for debate and questions from you. So without further ado, I hope you will please join me in welcoming Arianna Huffington. [applause]

**Arianna Huffington:** Thank you so much, Jon, for this wonderful introduction. I must say that when I was telling my friends that I was coming to speak to *you* guys, they were asking me things like, "Now who is crazier – they for inviting you, or you for accepting?" [laughter] And then there were these shocked expressions – you know, like how shocked we were when people said that Trent Lott was going to appear on BET. [laughter] In fact, we had this absolutely wonderful dinner, I must say. I had such a good time talking with Roger and Jon and Bob (who was sitting further away) [inaudible] and Rich. And by the end of it, I started making some notes to my speech, and they asked me if I was writing my concession speech [laughter], and if I was ready to pay my dues, you know, to join them. [laughter] But I actually started wondering whether this organization actually suffered from some masochistic tendencies [laughter] that aren't fully analyzed. Jon asked me actually to formulate a question which you are all going to be asked to answer on your way out and it goes as follows: "Do you think your current level of masochism in your relationship is sufficient, or is there any room to be bashed by a tall redhead with a foreign accent?" [laughter] And speaking of my accent, can you all hear me and understand me?

**Audience:** Yes.

**Arianna Huffington:** Good, because I was recently speaking in Washington and I joked that I was born in Fresno, California and that I had cultivated this accent to give myself an air of being an ethnic minority. Just to show you how gullible the American public is, I received 37 letters from people asking me "How exactly did you go about changing your accent?" And two of them were from Fresno! Of course, my ex-husband has a different explanation as to why even though

I've lived in this country or in England longer than I've lived in Greece (where I was actually born), I still speak with a heavy accent. His explanation is that I never listen. [laughter] But then, that's what ex-husbands are supposed to say, right?

Before I move on, I would like to thank my friend Susan Pinkus, who is a good friend from Los Angeles and whose polls in the *Los Angeles Times* are invaluable except for the last one that I criticized in my last column. [laughter]

Let me, first of all, explain why I got into writing about polls. It really springs from my preoccupation with polls, from my preoccupation with leadership. Ever since I was in my 20s, I've been incredibly concerned about the breakdown of leadership. In fact, when I was 26, I wrote a book about it, which was rejected by 36 publishers. It was published in America by Stein and Day, which has subsequently gone bankrupt. Nevertheless, they published my book. But the point of that book was really that the crisis in leadership in the West (it was a big book, not that everyone will read it) has only gotten worse, and with every passing year, I believe that more and more... until I nourished the conclusion that we are being governed by fanatics and fools and that polling is being used to enable the fanaticism and the foolishness. So it's not that you – in your impeccable, pristine platonic idea – are bad, but the way you are used is bad. Do you understand the distinction? Because I know that we are going to hear a lot from the three guys who are eventually going to gang up on me about how wrong I am. [laughter] But remember they're going to talk about this sort of platonic idea of polling and I'm going to talk about the *reality*, which is how it's *used*. And that's really what I want you to keep constantly present as you're listening to them. I want it to be a kind of framework in which you can hear me and hear them.

I'm sure you all know a lot. I feel a little like Claire Booth Luce who was given an audience of the pope [inaudible] and she became a Catholic and she went on, going on and on about Catholicism until she really had to stop and tell her mother, "In case you forget, I'm already a Catholic." [laughter]

A lot of what I am going to tell you is old hat to you, but nevertheless let's just look briefly at the history of polling in politics... because in 1976, remember, it was the first election dominated by pollsters – the young Pat Caddell who ran Jimmy Carter's polling, and who you may remember was the first (the youngest guy, actually) on Richard Nixon's enemy list, but he was a very good person. [laughter] And then, you know, it went on to 1992 to the "Bush 41 Company" which was actually run by pollsters, the first company to actually formally be run by Bob Teeter and the vacuity of that campaign is hard to match because basically nothing happened in that campaign. No sentence was uttered until an opinion had been polled. And then we moved on to 1996 and Bob Dole and his three policy priorities which were all pollcasted by Tony Fabrizio. And you may remember that [...] Bob Dole lost, despite following Tony Fabrizio's advice as to his three policy priorities which were tax cuts (an amazing surprise for everyone in America), number two – attack Clinton for his lack of seriousness about attacking teen drug use, and number three – attack Clinton as a tax-and-spend liberal. You know, it was all very original, it was very imaginative, the kind of visionary leadership we expected from Bob Dole. [laughter] And then after – just before he went on plug Viagra [laughter] – Tony Fabrizio booked the National Press Club to explain why Bob Dole got it wrong and why the timing wasn't right for a 16% tax cut, which was somehow forgetting that he had been there at the conception of the 16% tax cut.

This is just a little bit of history, and in between all that, there are some bright moments like the story that Dick Wirthlin told me of when he went in to Ronald Reagan's office with the polling results about taking on the air traffic controllers, and he said to him, "Mr. President, this is not something we should do. The poll numbers are terrible; over 70% of the people are against you." And Reagan said, "Well then, we have to change their minds, won't we?" which is opposed to the platonic idea of what Bob [Shapiro] is going to tell us – that leaders do use polling to fine-tune their message and to be able to convince the public of what they believe. No, don't listen to a word he says about this. [laughter]

I gave you only a handful of instances in American politics when that happened. Most of the time, they really use polling to tell them what to believe, but we'll get into that in a minute. And that actually goes very much *against* the whole founding of this country, because as James Madison said, "The whole purpose of democracy and leadership is to refine and enlarge the

public's views." It's not just to take them and then basically feed it back to them in this kind of toxic recycling that at the moment passes for democratic discourse. So right now, polls have not just become a substitute for leadership; they have become a substitute for debating and for thinking. I don't know how many times I've been on television recently and I've been told, "Well, the president's approval rating is 77%." My first answer is, "So what?" And the second answer is, "Let's deconstruct the number."

[...] I know you here may be deconstructing the number and actually analyzing what it really means, but the media just throw the numbers around as a way to shut you up. "This is it – 77%." [...] Just a week after the number was bandied around, *Newsweek* came out with a number that was 65% – a 12% drop. Somehow it's forgotten, because it's that number that sticks.

And if you deconstruct the numbers, you see some really bad things within it, including the fact that the president, unlike his father who had 80% of Democrats on his side after the Gulf War, [...] has 49% of Democrats and actually only 49% of all of the entire universe that support his handling of the economy. Now you would have thought that's a sign of major weakness, but the media are again ignoring all the subsidiary questions, and the subsidiary numbers and focusing on this big bold 77% again and again and again until it begins to impact the discourse to such an extent that I believe it is really dangerous for a democracy the way it makes many people somehow stop their own continuation of thinking and arguing.

Now, if we move on to how all this started with George Bush – because let us just deal with the current leaders. After 9/11, you may remember he had a stratospheric 92% approval rating. And I often wondered whether that was just a kind of response by people who basically were approving *not* of the leader we had, but of the leader we *needed* to have. You know what is the psychology behind that, we all wanted to rally around. You know, we all wanted to be together as a nation and that's the president we had. What can I do? [laughter]

But as a result, all these numbers, all these approval ratings that are being bandied around have had a disastrous impact on the Democratic leadership. I mean, the congenital spinelessness of Democratic leaders is tragic. Watching Tom Daschle on Meet the Press last Sunday is like



watching a man terrified of opening his mouth, of hearing himself talk, just in case he says something which may not be approved by the American public, or which may not be absolutely consistent with what his pollsters and focus group testers have told him is the way to proceed.

And somehow we don't hear a lot about the fact that just before the September 11 attacks, to be precise in May 2000, in various major polls taken, they asked the public to let us know what are the issues most on their minds. What are the issues they are most concerned about? You may remember that terrorism was number 16. Point-four percent (0.4%) of the American public believed that terrorism was an important issue. And guess what? About 0.4% of the American leaders acted as though terrorism was an important issue.

You may remember when the Gary Hart-Warren Rudman report came out, it was ignored. It was ignored by political leaders. It was ignored by two administrations (both Bill Clinton's and George Bush's administration). It was ignored by all the media including the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* did not write anything about that report. And I believe that the issue of terrorism did not appear in any poll as a grave concern – or even as a minor concern for the American public – is a significant factor as to why that major issue was ignored – despite the Hart-Rudman report, despite the successive reports of the CIA, despite the FBI. At least those were paying attention.

And that really leads us to how the media are covering facts. Again, it's become a very lazy way to produce cable television. [laughter, applause] You know, you basically lead with a head-to-head which, as you know, is particularly meaningless when you examine what the margin of error really means. I mean, I know for me, it was a bit of a revelation what a margin of error really means, and I'll tell you how I came to understand that. I know you all know that, but remember I'm pretty typical of political junkies, forget the general public at large. I mean, political junkies like me get the margin of error wrong. And I've done an informal poll of my own... with a margin of error of zero. [laughter] And I haven't found anybody who gets it.

So the way I came to it is because there was one day when – we're talking about just before the November 2000 elections – when at 6:23 pm on Friday, CNN/USA Today/Gallup proclaimed

that George Bush had a 13-point lead over Al Gore: 52 to 39% – you know, this would have been ridiculous in itself, but be that as it may. The absurdity was compounded by the release a mere two hours later at 8:36pm of a CNN/Time poll that had Bush's lead down to 6 points. What had happened?! Had W. been caught buying an eight ball of blow at 7:02 pm? [laughter] No! He had not!

As it turned out, the absurdity was further compounded by CNN polling director Keating Holland's explanation as to why these two divergent polls were statistically in agreement, given the polls' margin of sampling error. So, bewildered by his assertion that a 13-point lead was somehow in agreement with a 6-point lead, I called him to clarify. I must say that whenever I've called a pollster to clarify, they've been very polite and very nice. I must say that about the profession, okay? Nobody hung up on me! [laughter]

So, here's what he said. Here's his lesson in American alchemy. [laughter] And I quote, "Take Bush's number in the first poll," he explained, you know, patiently, like he was talking to a slightly, you know, deficient child [laughter], "52 percent, ya? With a margin of error of 3.5 percent, that means he could have been as high as 55.5 percent or as low as 48.5 percent. Same with Gore's numbers, he could have been as high as 42.5 or as low as 35.5." He then walked me through the same margin of error calculations for the second poll, reaching the conclusion that anything – from Bush being ahead by twenty points to Bush and Gore being tied – would fall within the range of statistical agreement. Or as he put it, "They agree as close as you can demand two polls to agree."

In other words, two polls – one showing a landslide, the other a dead heat – do not contradict each other in this "through the looking-glass" world of polling. [laughter] Now, of course, if anyone got up on television and explained all this, they wouldn't be on television again. [laughter] Because the whole thing is about this kind of head-to-head, right? It's about the drama of the race, and not the intricacies of the margin of error as you professionals understand it. So these are the numbers that we have to deal with, and these are the numbers that are being bandied around, and these are the numbers that are being used to fundraise, and these are the numbers that are being used to basically eradicate the opposition because they are immediately seen as

non-viable and cannot raise money, and therefore they are the numbers that get us to 98.5% incumbency reelection – which I don't think is a good thing – in a democracy, because it's pretty close to what Saddam Hussein was getting, and look at what happened to him. [laughter] But we don't actually know what happened to him. That's another story, right? –[laughter] Maybe he's with the other dead-or-alive guy we don't know what happened to, but I'm not here to talk about politics, alright?... Although that would have been fun.

So another related problem – and my friend Mark Mellman is here. I don't know if he's available, but I saw him outside at the bar. [laughter] I didn't mean it that way! He was having a Diet Coke! So Mark, among other things, like now doing the polling for John Kerry, specializes in commissioned polls. And I remember being at a conference with Mark about campaign finance reform. We had, like, all the major think tanks working on campaign finance reform, the activists, all the groups working on that. And we were told that the meeting was convened by Common Cause, that Mark would start the meeting with a poll about campaign finance reform. And I really objected to that because I believe that if we're really going to change the system, we have to stop just constantly producing polls about the current system, because we're never then going to really be able to change things.

And that is related also to another poll that Mark did, commissioned by Family Campaign that proved – what a surprise! – that people are in favor of public financing of campaigns. Have you ever incidentally seen a commissioned poll that came out against what the people commissioning the poll wanted it to come out against (or for)? Because if you have, I'd love to see it! Because in my experience, whenever the NRA commissions a poll, it proves that people want no gun control. Whenever the Brady people commission a poll, it proves that the people *want* gun control. And if Mitch McConnell has commissioned a poll, I'm sure it will come out against campaign finance reform. And you get my drift.

For me, the kind of argument in commissioned polls was the sort of poll commissioned by Lockheed Martin, of Mark, and which was a really a very special poll because it had really an audience of one – the president of the United States, Bill Clinton at the time, and the poll was commissioned to prove that the majority of the American people (59% to be precise) wanted us

to spend \$2 billion to fight the drug war in Colombia. Now, in my opinion, the majority of the American people do not know where Colombia is! [laughter] But maybe we can poll them.

So [...] here was this poll by Lockheed Martin that was then taken to the White House to convince the president that he should produce this huge aid package for Columbia. (It turned out to be \$1 billion-something. Okay, they didn't get exactly what they wanted, but that was a pretty large number considering all our underfunded domestic priorities.) So my question is, if only homeless children could commission someone to do a poll for them to show that the American people want us to spend two billion dollars on them, wouldn't that be a good thing? But somehow homeless children do not commission polls... [laughter] And that's one of the other reasons why I have a problem with the predominance of polling in a political light.

So, let me also say that if you do anything... You know, I've actually considered at one point to commission a poll about my column. Here's how it's going to be phrased. I was going to say: "Given the choice, would you rather read this column or have a tooth drilled?" [laughter] And I would predict that the results are 70% of people would strongly or somewhat agree that they would rather read my column than having their tooth drilled, and there would be 25% unsure. Some of you here would rather have your tooth drilled than read my column! [laughter] But anyway, I'm sure that all of you here can all come up with marvelous ways to phrase questions to prove whatever the people paying you, right, wanted proved. And that's nothing against or negative toward your profession! [laughter] It's just the way it's used! Not everybody here does commissioned polls, and I'm sure some of you here are so pure that you would never dream of doing a commissioned poll, but I'm talking about what dominates a political discourse – that's the whole subject of my talk, and a bunch of my friends here.

Now, let us then move on to what happened to me in February 2001. [...] After the election, I know there were all these inaccuracies and I had a lot of columns on the inaccuracies of the predictions and I understand that polls are not supposed to predict, but they're *used* in a predictive way. But nevertheless, I say, "Okay, let's move on. February of 2001, let bygones be bygones. I don't need to write another column bashing polling." And then, all that changed one day when I was watching television.

There was a poll that was everywhere, conducted by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion (and no, they're not here – I checked!) [laughter] that found, [...] and I quote, “that if the 2004 presidential election were held today – that is, February 2001 – 49 percent of registered voters would vote for Bush, 44 percent would pick Gore. Seven percent were undecided.” [laughter] Okay, to me – this is really about as meaningful as phrasing a question in the following way, which I will suggest you try one day, "If the world were to stop spinning, and all life were placed in a state of suspended animation, who would you like to see in the Oval Office when you thawed out?" [laughter]

[...] My point is why are grown people [laughter] wasting their time conducting such meaningless polls? And more importantly, why do grown people in the media insist on disseminating them as newsworthy?! It's like the Frank Luntz poll [...], "Who would you rather spend the weekend with, Bill Clinton or Bob Dole?" [laughter] Remember that poll? I think about 70% of respondents said they would rather kill themselves than spend a weekend [inaudible, laughter]...

You know what? I think this is funny. I think it's amusing! I think this kind of poll should be on the same page as the horoscope. Everyone wants to be entertained, let them read Frank Luntz's polls. But I don't think that's polling – and yet, I mean, there he is on the television all the time, being interviewed as a pollster! I don't know if he's a member of your organization... [laughter] He's not? I get it. But in terms of how or what the public perceives pollsters to be – Frank Luntz is a pollster for the public. They don't make the distinctions that you all make in this room, and that's really what is important to understand – and I'm sure you do – about how the profession is perceived.

So, to go back to this poll, I actually called Dr. Lee Miringoff. I talk to pollsters a lot! You know, I have kind of a secret thing with pollsters [laughter] and he's the director of the Marist Institute, as I'm sure you know. Is he a member of the organization?

**Audience:** Yes.

**Arianna Huffington:** He is. Okay, I don't want to be judging people who aren't members. And, I said to him, "In all your years polling – I mean, four years, that's a long time to be making predictions." And he didn't miss a beat. He said to me, "But it's only three years until New Hampshire! Two years, and then it's one year until New Hampshire." [laughter] By that point, I was practically tasting Steve Forbes' barbeque at the Iowa straw polls! [laughter] Then, my only question really was, what's the deal with the seven percent who are undecided? [laughter] What are they waiting for?! [laughter] For the final, final, final, Florida count?! [laughter] Or are they just a bunch of [inaudible], holding off until they saw how W. handled his second week in office before making up their minds? [laughter]

So, the second reason why I'm very concerned about the dominance of polling in a political discourse... The first, if you remember, is my concern about leadership – political leadership – in this country. The second reason is [...] I believe that our country is in a very dangerous moment right now, that we have effectively become two nations, and that one nation is living under a different set of rules, laws, and regulations than the other. And it's not just economic disparities that I'm talking about.

Although [inaudible], I have a sidebar that I'm calling "Upstairs, Downstairs" where I give a lot of statistical evidence of these disparities. And just to mention one, in 1980, the average CEO was making 42 times as much as the average worker. And by the year 2000, the average CEO was making 571 times as much as the average worker, and that's not because they were doing a good job! [laughter] So, I believe that these disparities are feudal, and they're not sustainable in a democracy. And I believe that the reason why we are having this debate that is dominating the nation about tax cuts – when the debate is not as to whether we should be insane enough to have tax cuts, but how huge should the tax cuts be – is because, for some reason, the Democratic leadership has been convinced, because of all of the polling being done (especially a lot of the internal polling that I've seen), that the American people want tax cuts. And therefore they're not going to offer anything else. Now, I don't believe that. But more importantly, I believe that insane public policy is being justified in that way, and it's not being countered and it's not being challenged.

And I believe that as a result, we are in a very dangerous place as a nation. I repeat that. And so, if you want change, if you want real reform – if you want the people who are left behind to be on the forefront of the political agenda again, how do you do that through polling? And really, I'm now kind of going to plead with you to find a way to somehow ask the kind of questions, conduct the kind of in-depth surveys that would put these issues back on the forefront of the political agenda – because it is *absolutely* necessary if we are not going to ignore the pain in this country the way we are ignoring it at the moment.

When you have schools being closed down early in Oregon and in California because we don't have the money to pay teachers – and yet, that's nowhere part of our political discussion. When we have two million more people out of work since George Bush became president, and yet all this administration and its spokespeople are doing again and again is repeat the word "jobs, jobs, jobs" in any speech. [inaudible] ... must have mentioned the word three dozen times in one speech! [laughter] Despite all the evidence of this tax cut, we have no [inaudible] for jobs. They just keep repeating that like a mantra, which clearly has been given to them by their pollsters, by their focus groups, in a way that simply validates the kind of fanaticism that is dominating at the moment Washington. And unfortunately, when fanatics are not being challenged, they prevail. And one of the core – Part of fanaticism is to be impervious to evidence. It doesn't matter how much evidence you show that the last tax cut (\$1 trillion-three) did not lead to any jobs. On the contrary, it doesn't matter because this is all reason and evidence, and it doesn't work. And so as a result, you have this complete cave-in on behalf of the Democratic leadership, which does not produce any sort of countervailing force to what we have dominating the Republicans at the moment, both in the White House and on the Hill.

So, it's because of what I believe is an incredible need for real reform in this country – real social change – and for pulling these issues of the under-funded domestic priorities to the forefront of the political agenda, that I'm asking you to actually find a way – not just to feed the kind of political monster of the media and the politicians with fresh numbers that they can use, and – I grant you – often misuse. But to somehow, find a way to put the real problems this country's

facing on the forefront of their attention, in a way that they – addicts, as they are – will have no choice but to use. Thank you. [applause]

**Jon:** But you promised me – no jokes! [laughter] Let me tell you what she meant to say. [laughter] What she meant to say was this: Politicians are addicted to polls, but polls are unreliable. Polls are unreliable for two reasons: number one, the response rates are low and dropping; number two, question wording and question order effects allow you to get any result you want out of a survey. But they're addicted, and they won't stop relying on numbers that aren't reliable. The only way to stop the problem is to stop the source and end the polling. We have three very distinguished scholars who I can tell you have spent a lifetime working on that problem [applause], and they have for us tonight their thoughts on these issues. I am very, very grateful to the three of them and I'm very happy to be able to introduce them to you.

We begin with Bob Shapiro, who is chair of the Political Science Department and professor at Columbia University. He has won all of the awards we wish we all would win, and in particular, his most recent book is entitled *Politicians don't pander*, and I'm glad to introduce you to Bob Shapiro. [applause]

**Bob Shapiro:** Thank you. In response to some of the comments to be made, I want to add a few things to my thoughts – so Jon, feel free to cut me off as needed. I enjoyed very much the jokes of the kinds of polls and survey questions we've asked. I'm sure all of you in this room have lots of jokes to tell about polls you've done.

In preparing for this talk and some other things I'm doing, I looked back at some old Gallup polls and Harris polls and two of my favorite questions were: In 1936, there was a Gallup poll that asked the following question, "Do you favor or oppose the Toronto Baby Derby?" [laughter] It conjures up all kinds of images! Actually, we're talking about some kind of legitimate population-related policy in Canada at the time. My favorite one, though, is a 1983 Harris poll that asked people in the survey, "Did you have sex last night?" [laughter] Forty-seven percent said yes, forty-five percent said no and eight percent said not sure. [laughter] I agree completely that there are a lot of strange things that come out of surveys.



Some very interesting points were just made. I think the most important thing about this evening is that it is an exercise in public education about public opinion, and the role of public opinion and polling in a democracy. I don't think we're going to come to any firm conclusions tonight, but I think it's important to have these kinds of open discussions, and I appreciate AAPOR having this panel to give us an opportunity to do it in the context of an excellent talk by one of our biggest critics who gave a very nuanced presentation of some of her thoughts, I think a little more nuanced than some of the ways she's written about them. [laughter, applause]

I actually agree with a lot of the political points that she made. Consistent with my own personal ideology, I think that I would emphasize that the problem here is with the politicians. Unfortunately, for some of us Democrats, it's with Democrats. But it's not with the polls – it's not with the polling industry per se. Pollsters and the polling industry are really not as independent, of course, as journalists are per se at raising issues. I mean, we who do polling do work for money. We do academic-style work, and the burden is not necessarily on us to be an independent force in politics, other than in our own particular role as individuals. So blaming pollsters in that particular way, I think, is not quite right.

With regard to some of the other points she made, her examples about Pat Caddell and in particular about Ronald Reagan and the air traffic controllers, I think, are entirely relevant and not really inconsistent with the story I want to tell about polls and politics. I would take issue with her point about commissioned polls and findings inconsistent with what the sponsors want. I want to just remind everyone that the Roper Organization under the leadership of Bud Roper did polls for the American Jewish Committee with regard to public opinion in the United States toward Israel. I tracked these polls in some of the research I've done regarding trends in public opinion. In tracking polls, I kept track of the polling organization and the sponsors, and I wondered whether or not the results of the polls were in some way feeding the agenda of the sponsors and might be at odds with more ostensibly objectively sponsored polls. And for some of the data... there was one time series on whether or not people have sympathy for the Israelis or the Arabs or the Palestinians (the wording changed a little bit over time). I tracked the American Jewish Committee polls done by Roper against Gallup polls and the results were fairly similar.

So I would simply cite that as an example of commissioned polls not necessarily being at odds with more objective polls. And I'm sure Bud Roper had no hesitation in presenting those results to the American Jewish Committee.

With regard to public education on polling, and I hope I'm not too long-winded here, but I want to make four points. First, I challenge the most fundamental premise in the common wisdom that politicians and policy-makers closely follow polls and that they do what the polls say the public wants. This is a false and blanket conclusion. The fact that political parties do polls, doesn't mean they're doing them so that they'll do things that are acceptable to the public. If that were the case, existing research on the relationship between public opinion and policy-making would – should – show a high level of correspondence or correlation between short-term changes in public opinion and what policies governments enact, and that's not the case. The results there are highly mixed. Granted, with regard to long-term patterns of swings in liberal and conservative opinion, there's some close tracking of public opinion and policy-making. But looking at short-term changes, the results are mixed, consistent with the idea that there's really a mixture of efforts of responsiveness of political leadership going on. There's no indication whatsoever that this correlation is increasing over time, as polls become more prominent in public debate and discourse. In fact, there's some evidence that the degree of correspondence and correlation between public opinion and policy-making may be going down. So basically, there's no evidence supporting either extreme position: that polls are being used for leaders to respond to public opinion or that they're being used to lead public opinion.

So why is that? In short, how policy-makers use polls is not a simple choice to lead or follow public opinion. The normative choice is not a clear one that politicians and policy-makers ought to *always* lead or follow public opinion. If I had to identify the dominant pattern, it is that polls have been used by politicians to pursue ideological or policy agendas, and not for giving the public necessarily what it wants – except during periods of re-elections. And here, this is where politicians need to worry about avoiding criticism for purposes of being elected or re-elected, so that they can then pursue the policy goals – the *other* policy goals – that they want to attain.

So we have cases of polls ostensibly influencing where President Clinton went on vacation. More compellingly, around the same time, in the run-up to the 1996 election, public opinion figured into President Clinton's decision to sign welfare reform into law, and into the Republicans voting for an increase in the minimum wage – things that they were predisposed not to support. This is evidence of politicians running to the political middle during an election. So what's wrong with political leaders responding to the threat of being held accountable by the voters? Constitutionally, this is the one shot that voters get every two or four years. The founders of our republic would permit no more than this. In fact, they attempted to create a political system in which the nation's leaders were as insulated as possible from "the winds and passions of the mass public." In fact, to this date, it is still politically incorrect for any political leader to go on record as saying that polling is used for responding to public opinion.

In contrast, polls have historically been used in ways that are hardly characterized by responsiveness in public opinion. And examples that were just pointed out earlier are really consistent with the mix of responsiveness in leadership that you actually find if you look at the evidence and cases. I can't do justice to the variety and complexity of all this in a few minutes, but these uses have substantially been for purposes of leading or manipulating public opinion to obtain policy goals or for other political purposes. Now, there may be a fine line between leadership and manipulation, but this hardly represents politicians slavishly doing what polls tell them. Rather, they – politicians and policy-makers – have attempted to use information from polls to move the public in the direction they want to go.

The best I can do here is a quick, drive-by, simplified history of polling. Franklin Roosevelt was, in fact, the first president to use polling from pollster Hadley Cantril. To the extent that Roosevelt used polls, it was to work, for example, toward making the public more receptive to helping Britain early in World War II, especially through Lend Lease. Roosevelt tracked his efforts to move public opinion and then to appear to respond to the public opinion that he helped shape. Next, fast forward to John Kennedy, who had Lou Harris as his consultant and pollster. During Kennedy's primary and general election, he made foreign policy a major issue in a way that defied any indication from his polls that this is what the public wanted him to focus on – as the nation was faced with an economic downturn and other problems. According to the archival

and other records, Kennedy focused on foreign policy to gain credibility in elite circles whose support he needed for electoral purposes and for governing if he won the presidency. Further, he could and did use foreign policy as an issue to showcase himself as a new generation of political leaders, emphasizing visibly his personal and leadership qualities. On to Lyndon Johnson, neither the Vietnam War nor the War on Poverty sprang from the results of polls conducted by Oliver Quayle (that was his pollster). The polls were used to track and modify Johnson's approach and tactics of leadership—or manipulation—on these issues. Richard Nixon stated loudly on the record that leaders should not do nor rely on polling, and, of course, he did more polling than any president up to that time, with the help of polls by the Opinion Research Corporation (where Harry O'Neill used to work) and Robert Teeter and Market Opinion Research. Like Roosevelt and Lend Lease, Nixon used polls to track his progress, for example, toward gaining public support for mainland China's membership in the UN and further diplomatic openings to China.

Jumping further ahead, there was an evolution in – this is some history – American politics that had occurred as a result of transformations in the political parties, related in part to the civil rights issue. The end result – this is a long history – was that the Democratic and Republican parties, by the mid-1970s, became more ideologically polarized, and homogeneous internally, as can be found in trends in roll call voting in Congress. While politicians have both electoral and policy and ideological objectives, since the mid-1970s pressure mounted to pursue vigorously policy objectives and to use polling to help craft messages to sell policies, *not* to respond to public opinion. There is evidence of this during the Reagan administration (as the one example pointed out) and less so during the elder Bush administration. But this became most visibly pronounced during the Clinton years. Clinton was clearly the poster boy for the argument that politicians don't do anything without being blessed by their pollsters. My immediate response to that is three words: Health Care Reform. Yes, the Clinton administration polled like crazy on health care reform – but only *after* the reform program was put together and *not* to determine what the public would support in the plan. (How could the public support such a wacky plan? [laughter]) The polling was done to help figure out how to craft messages as part of a campaign to sell the plan. When this failed (now keep in mind, these efforts aren't always successful) and

the Democrats took a beating in the 1994 midterm elections, Clinton replaced his pollster Stanley Greenberg with Dick Morris.

Now if there is such evidence that politicians aren't pandering in the sense of slavishly following public opinion as measured in the polls, why do critics claim that politicians are pandering in this way? There is some research showing – and we may have seen some evidence here tonight – that critics just rationalize this in the case of policies that they disagree with; they falsely blame the polls and the public when in fact the public prefers the same outcome they do! They might do better by concluding that we'd better off if politicians pandered more, not less!

Okay, on to my second point and I will be briefer. If you claim that the problem is that politicians want to respond to public opinion, why would they want to use polling data that are bad measures of public opinion? Are they just duped into paying their pollsters? Yes, maybe, but how long could that last? Now, the answer here is self-serving, and we need be careful of hubris here: Pollsters and consultants are, overall, skilled and experienced. They know how to design polls, they know polling's limitations and sources of errors, they understand question wording effects and so forth, and they have ideas concerning how to use such data for purposes of being responsive to public opinion or for purposes of leading. But *how* to use such data is a choice politicians and policymakers have to make – not the pollsters.

Third, I argue that the public *should* respond to polls. They should do so for reasons that have to do with democracy – but not democracy in the knee-jerk sense that political leaders should be devoted to doing what public wants. There is ample room and a role for *both* leadership and responsiveness. Polls, in principle, can be stunningly democratic and especially egalitarian in that they *can attempt* to solicit opinion from a sample of *everyone*, not just those who have opportunities and an economic or other interest in being engaged actively in politics. In practice, of course, there are problems in pursuing such equality of voice, but polls can strive toward that goal and any other one. (One looks through the AAPOR program and I think we're doing a good job of least striving to achieve that goal.) It is important for this voice to be heard in the political process through reporting about public opinion in the press.

I would argue that politicians, the press, and the public at large itself should use, debate, and wrestle with public opinion as a regular part of the political discourse. We should debate why political leaders should or should not be responding to public opinion. For example, the often criticized – as we've been discussing in part tonight – polling and reporting about public opinion in the recent war and ongoing peace process in Iraq, is something we should strive to improve, not to chill. As part of the history and expansion of polling world-wide, it is no accident that as transition toward democratic government occurs, opinion polling emerges and expands. The fact that two pollsters in Iran were recently arrested, convicted, and sentenced to prison is telling and stunning. We will know much more about democratic regime change in Iraq when we see the pollsters working freely there...

Fourth, and last. The public should respond to polls for another broader reason having to do with the big picture (as I see it with my own biases) of public opinion research. I offer this final claim also as something I'd like to say about Bud Roper in his role as chair and member of the Board of Directors of the Roper Center and its important historical archive. Here's the point: To tell people not to respond to polls would deny us the means to understand better and reflect upon our history, our society, and our nation. Just as we've learned about demographics and other changes from the census and all manners of other surveys, we've learned much about change and stability in American public opinion since 1935 when George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, and Elmo Roper, followed by Bud Roper and others, began and continued to do surveys. Bud Roper was part of a great generation that is known for its patriotism and civic activism, and we all know that Bud was a good example of that. It's also a generation, in my opinion, that has a great sense of history. Public opinion research has helped track important parts of this history, and let me give you a quick sense of it, and I'll try to be very brief.

At the very beginning, in September 1935, Gallup Poll No. 1, Question 1, asked (and I realize that most of you here have committed that to memory as part of your induction into AAPOR, but let me just remind you): "Do you think expenditures by the Government for *relief* (that's the old term for "welfare") and recovery are too little, too great, or just about right?" This may come as a surprise to some of you, maybe not others. Sixty percent said too great, 31 percent said about

right, and a mere 9 percent said too little. You can imagine how Roosevelt reacted to George Gallup in 1935.

Fast forward to 1994. Not long before welfare reform in the U.S., the NORC General Social Survey asked about spending on "welfare" and reported that 60 percent (another 60 percent) said we were spending too much, 24 percent about right, and a mere 13 percent saying too little. This suggests something about American values and liberalism that had overall not changed that much in 60 years. Survey research tracked the profound transformation in American public opinion from World War II isolationism to large majorities during the war and continuing to this day supporting US activism in world affairs. During the early Cold War, polls tracked large and stable majorities supporting economic aid to Europe under the Marshall Plan

Some more quick history: the public has not always overwhelmingly supported capital punishment. There was a time from the early 1950s to 1966, when support dropped from over 70 percent to under 50 percent, returning later to higher levels of support that we see today. The common wisdom about high levels of support for increasing spending levels on Social Security has been tracked for years and is strikingly true. It also true that when asked in the abstract about foreign aid, the public perceives we're spending too much, but as in the case of support for the Marshall Plan, the public thinks differently in the context of which countries are receiving the aid, at what point in time, and what forms of assistance. There is also no clear support for the common wisdom that young adults disproportionately opposed the escalation of the Vietnam War and other wars. Quite the contrary, they have been among the most supportive.

Okay, two final examples and I'll quit. Two minutes. There is a rich history of survey research on race and civil rights in the U.S. A profound change in opinion occurred regarding segregation in schools. In 1942, not much more than 30 percent of the public favored "Negro and white children attending the same school"; this then rose to 90 percent, a 60 percent change, forty years later.

And, last, the most stunning change that I have seen in the available trend data occurred in the case of responses to a question about whether people approved of a married woman working if

she has a husband capable of supporting her. Now keep in mind that in 1939 Massachusetts and Illinois were apparently considering legal restrictions on the employment of women during the Great Depression. (That's the rationale here.) In 1936 not much more than a mere 10 percent – ten percent – of the public approved of married women working – compared to more than *90 percent* approving of this more than 50 years later, a fully 80 percentage point change. I can go on and on about change and stability in American public opinion, as some of you know.

[laughter]

So, stop talking to pollsters? Why would we want this kind of understanding of our history – and future – to end? Thank you. [applause]

**Jon Krosnick:** Thank you, Bob. Roger Tourangeau is Senior Research Scientist at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan and the Director of the Joint Program in Survey Methodology at the University of Maryland. Roger has been all around this business working previously at the Gallup Organization, the National Opinion Research Center, CODA, and was even a professor of psychology before that. Author of three books including *The psychology of survey response* and 60 articles, chapters and reports, Roger is the recipient of the highest honor from WAPOR, the 2002 Helen Dinerman award. I'm pleased to introduce Roger Tourangeau. [applause]

[Click here to view Tourangeau's power point presentation.](#)

**Roger Tourangeau:** [RT1] Thank you, Jon. My job was to respond to a lot of charges that didn't seem to get made. [laughter] Beautifully done, Arianna, charmingly done. I'm supposed to talk about nonresponse, order effects, and other sources of error and so I'll do that – despite its irrelevance. [laughter] *Some* of us can stick to our assignments. [laughter] So let me tell you what I was going to tell you.

[RT2] Many surveys maintain high response rates despite the unfavorable climate for surveys. Nonresponse rates don't necessarily imply nonresponse bias and so far the drop in response rate hasn't seemed to have an impact on accuracy. In terms of a couple of charges that appeared in a



recent column of yours, there's not much evidence of plummeting response rates though they are dropping. And there's not much evidence that polls are increasingly inaccurate. I want to talk about a little bit about order and wording effects. They definitely can have a big effect on the answers that people give. They're not ubiquitous and often they're not large, and they're not necessarily a sign of error. Finally, I'll talk about social desirability and other biases.

The conclusion that I'm going to reach is that non-sampling error is a part of life, like sampling error, and the issue is whether the results consistently lead to false conclusions. And as somebody who served on council during the period when Frank Luntz was sanctioned by AAPOR [laughter], I share your disapproval of a certain sector in the industry.

[RT3] So, nonresponse. Are nonresponse rates rising? This is a chart that I actually stole from Bob Groves. My gratitude to him for providing it. It shows the trends in both refusal rates (those are the red dots) and overall nonresponse rates in the Consumer Expenditure Survey, which is a survey done by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. You can see nonresponse rates have crept up. They actually have improved somewhat – or nonresponse rates have crept up actually and improved somewhat – and the driving factor has been refusal rates. You can see that those two bars are about as parallel as parallel gets.

[RT4] You see a similar pattern in the National Health Interview Survey. You can see that nonresponse has risen to about 11%, so that means it's an 89% response rate, which ain't bad, I think. All of us would want to have an 89% response rate in all our surveys, and again, it's driven in a large part by rising refusal rates.

[RT5] Those are two face-to-face surveys and the situation with respect to RDD surveys is similar... Actually, we heard some data from Jon, among others, today. There is evidence that the rates are falling, but not dramatically. The response rates for RDD surveys... Steeh looked at two. One of them was Michigan's Survey of Consumer Attitudes. One of the points that she makes about that survey, I believe, was also made in a talk today by Richard Curtin (who's the director of that survey) is that it takes about twice as many calls than it used to, to get a completed case. In fact, despite that, despite this increased effort, , there still is a trend downward

in the response rates. An issue here in RDD surveys seems to be contact rather than refusal driving things. It's harder to get a hold of people; once you get a hold of them, they're still fairly likely to take part. A formula that I didn't see in any of *your* arguments, Arianna, [laughter] describes the relationship – perhaps I missed it– describes the relationship between nonresponse error and nonresponse rates. And there you see it's a multiplicative thing.

[RT6] The expected nonresponse rate times the difference between the statistic for the respondents and the statistic for the non-respondents is the key thing. And there are a couple of things to notice about this formula. One would expect, looking at this formula, that if the nonresponse rates go up, the bias would go up as well. There are two circumstances in which this is not true. One circumstance is that there is basically no systematic difference between the responders and the non-responders, so if this term (the term on the right-hand side) is zero, it really doesn't matter what the response rate is. Paul Biemer actually suggested in his talk today a more complicated story that says that as the nonresponse rate goes up, the deviation between the respondents and the non-respondents may actually diminish. And he's presented some data from the BRFSS – the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey – that there can be this kind of negative relationship between the two terms so that as the one goes up, the other goes down to compensate. Biemer suggests some circumstances under which nonresponse rates might not correlate with nonresponse error.

The question is: What happens in real life? Do we know anything about the relationship between the responders and the non-responders? [RT7] There have been three empirical investigations plus the one that Paul reported today (for some reason I don't have that in my slides). [laughter] Those studies were done by Keeter et al. in 2000. This is a study that I think was actually first presented here at AAPOR that looked at two different experimental designs. Merkle and Edelman did a study looking at VNS data. I know VNS has had its problems [laughter], but they've done some methodological research that's interesting. And then my colleagues Richard Curtin and Eleanor Singer, along with Stanley Presser, had done a third study looking at data from a survey of consumers. And these studies ... it's interesting the three studies converge in their conclusions because they differ in a lot of ways. They have different study designs, they involve different topics, they have different types of surveys but they converge on the same

conclusion, which is that drops in response rates haven't yet produced increases in nonresponse bias.

[RT8] This is the summary of the results from the study by Merkle and Edelman. [laughter]. Before I go any further, it's obvious that God put Murray and Dan on earth to create a perfect picture of zero correlation. [laughter, applause] This chart relates the degree of error and the results of an exit poll to the response rates of the poll, and it just doesn't matter what the response rate of the poll was. One of the things they speculate on in their article is that the main determinant of the response rate for an exit poll is whether or not the exit poller got to stand close to the entrance or not, and that happens to be uncorrelated with whether the voters there are Democrats or Republicans, apparently. Both Democrats and Republicans don't like the pollsters near or far (in the same degree, apparently).

[RT9] So let me sum up what I have to say about nonresponse. We shouldn't tar all surveys with the same brush. Other surveys still work real hard to get response rates in the 80s or 90s. But even when they don't get high response rates, it's not clear that the errors introduced by nonresponse are serious – at least not yet. Paul Biemer made a good point in his talk today which was to say that all the empirical studies that we looked at are in a certain range, and it ranges from 30% to 60%. So it could be we're living in a fool's paradise. Outside this high-low range... this relationship will no longer hold. So there's no evidence of increasing inaccuracies of poll results. Now don't get me wrong. I'm the AAPOR Standards Chair and no one in this room has my permission not to try hard to get high response rates. [laughter, applause]

Another point I want to make real quickly is that it's not clear that people are refusing surveys in increasing numbers because they feel over-surveyed. They may *think* they are being over-surveyed because of the onslaught of telemarketers, some of whom pose as survey researchers. But the main story for the analysis of telephone survey response rate data suggests that the issue is that people have erected barriers to contact. It's not that they refuse when you get a hold of them, but that it's harder to get a hold of them. Okay, so much on nonresponse error.

[RT10] Let me turn to measurement error. Suppose we *got* better response rates. Could we then put more trust in the results? is the issue. And there is absolutely no doubt that question order and question wording can have an effect on the answers and that some of the effects can be quite large. In my review of the context effects literature, which has to do with the order in which questions are asked, the all-time champion context effect was a study done in 1950. Hyman and Sheatsley demonstrated a 37-point difference in answers to the question: “Do you think the United States should let Communist reporters from other countries come in here and send back to their papers the news as they see it?” What made a 37-point difference was whether or not an item that asked about U.S. reporters going into Communist countries came first or not, okay? That made a huge difference.

This is a very stable difference. It’s replicated, although considerably smaller, by Schuman and Presser and then in another study by Schuman and Ludwig. Okay, so you can get ’em. If you know what you’re doing, you can engineer them. I myself have engineered a number of context effects – for methodological purposes only. [laughter]

[RT11] But what’s the danger? How often do they crop up? And when they crop up sort of naturally, how bad are they? The General Social Survey for a while used a design – and they may still use this design – in which different people get different combinations of items, so it’s a naturally occurring context-effect experiment. They rotate items in and out through the survey to keep the total length of the survey constant and different people get different combinations. Some of you know about matrix sampling, and this is an example of it. So they use a design in which they vary the context systematically across different versions of the questionnaire.

By chance, you’d see 5% of the items having a significant context difference. Tom Smith actually only found 4% showing a difference. So it looks like not much is going on. Schuman and Presser did a similar study where they looked at 113 items in a 1971 Detroit Area Study where they had embedded a slew of experiments, and again, only eight showed significant differences by version. These natural experiments that Smith and Schuman and Presser looked at could be flawed in a sense given that the items in different parts of the questionnaire may not have much to do with each other.

[RT12] So what about items that are more closely related – the kinds of items that you’d see in a short political telephone poll, for example? So what happens when you vary the order of items on the same topic? Well gee, Tourangeau, Singer, and Presser – one of my best selves and two of my best colleagues [laughter] – looked at results from two studies on attitudes toward the centennial census which were done on behalf of the Census Bureau just before and after Census 2000. There were many embedded wording and order experiments just to see how robust the results were across these variations, and question wording and question order. And sure enough, the three of us were able to engineer 4 out of 5 order experiments that created at least some significant significant results. And the results that we found in the pre-survey tended to replicate in the post-survey. So, there were stable findings about order effects.

The effects, though, were generally small; they were in the order of 2 or 3 or 4%, and in no case did any important conclusion from the survey change as a result of the differences in question wording or order. Oh, and one other finding. We were able to look at the relationship between these attitudes and whether or not people actually returned their census form by mail and the experiments we did didn’t affect that relationship between the answers to the attitude items and actual behavior.

[RT13] Okay, what about response-order effects? Another thing that could affect the answers you get is what order the response options come in, and the data tell a similar story here. There was a paper – I saw Allyson somewhere in the audience today – a paper by Allyson Holbrook today on which I was the 15<sup>th</sup> author [laughter] which examined – I believe I got this number right – 548 response order experiment in Gallup polls. Twenty-one percent – about a fifth of those – response orders showed significant effects. So response order makes a difference. And as Allyson explained, I believe, 19 of the 21% were in the direction of recency, so the overwhelming majority of the error was in the same direction. On the other hand, the mean impact across these 548 experiments was that it made a difference of 2.2% – so, not huge exactly, and in fact, this is similar to the impact of ballot position in actual elections as discovered by Miller and Krosnick who report, on average a 2.3% difference in the share (vote share), depending on position on the ballot.

[RT14] Another kind of effect that Huffington has sometimes talked about in her column and there was a recent column... that was a subject of considerable discussion on AAPORnet. There were two items that Huffington wrote about that gave grossly different results. I've never much worried about question wording effects for reasons I'll describe in a second. Here are the two items: "There is evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Do you think the U.S. should or should not take military action against Iran if they continue to develop these weapons?" And 50% of the respondents said that they should (the United States should). And the Gallup Poll asked, "As you may know, the U.S. believes Iran, North Korea and Su – Syria are either providing assistance – you can see why I would never make it as a telephone interviewer [laughter] – to terrorists or attempting to develop weapons of mass destruction. For each, please say if you think the U.S. should or should not go to war with that country." And 24% said "should."

[RT15] Frank Newport, the editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll, pointed out on AAPORnet that there are a lot of differences between these items. The *LA Times* items asks about military action so the idea of, say, a surgical airstrike (remember when we had surgical airstrikes? It occurred in the Vietnam War.). Anyway, sometimes limited military action could be in people's minds. Whereas Gallup explicitly asks about going to war. The *LA Times* specifically mentions nuclear weapons. The Gallup poll doesn't. The *LA Times* asks conditionally if they continue to develop these weapons – these nuclear weapons ; Gallup doesn't ask conditionally.

I find these results kind of gratifying, actually. It's as if people are actually paying attention to the wording of the items. [laughter] You ask them different questions and guess what? They give you different answers! [laughter, applause] This is a question of bad polls versus nuanced public opinion; the issue with this could well be not that these are ridiculous poll items, but that the public actually has different views about different – slightly different – or related issues. Public opinion can seem a lot more fickle than it is. The differences between these items in fact represent real differences in policy.

One point that you brought up in your talk that I wasn't aware of – but I think is a good point – is that sometimes we do see these polls that ask grossly biased wording. And how do you find out about that? Well, we have responsible polls like the Gallup Poll, or in other cases, federally sponsored polls. There's an example that I'm aware of about what percentage of the population has ever engaged in defensive gun use. And there are a lot of commissioned polls that report that a fairly high percentage. You see these polls showing that 3 million people have defended themselves against crime with defensive gun use, for example. One of the reasons we can be skeptical about these results is that in fact there is a very careful survey – the National Crime Victimization Survey – that asks people about situations in which they've been victims of crime and whether they did anything about it. And the National Crime Victimization Survey suggests that the number is *way* smaller than any of these other polls. So one of the ways you converge on the truth is to have a variety of polls, and you can look at the differences and decide which ones are worth giving any weight to.

Am I out of time now?

**Jon Krosnick:** No. [laughter]

**Roger Tourangeau:** I want to sit down, Jon. [laughter] Thank you, Jon, but I'm not staying here any longer. [laughter]

[RT16] An area that I've worked on is in measuring sensitive behaviors and the results here have shown that there are – you can get different answers depending on how you ask the question about different sets of behaviors, and what I plotted here are the results from two methodological experiments that have compared asking the same questions – identically worded questions – using different modes of data collection. So what I plotted here are the results from two studies.

The attractive fuchsia bars are from a study by Schober et al. done at the Bureau of Labor Statistics and part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The blue bars are from a study done by Turner, Lessler, and Devore who looked at data from what was then called the National

Household Survey on Drug Abuse (but switched to a new acronym – the NHDUH – an unfortunate new acronym).

Both studies looked at lifetime, last year, and last month use of marijuana and cocaine, and I'll just highlight one result. The upper left hand corner shows the ratio between the proportion of people who reported cocaine use in the last month – depending on whether the questionnaire was self-administered or administered by an interviewer – and you get a *huge* effect. It's two and a half times higher when you have self-administration than when you have interviewer administration. I think most people have looked at these data and concluded that people are more willing to admit to use of illicit drugs in a self-administered setting.

Well, let me make several points about this. So on the one hand, you say, "Oh, this is dreadful! The studies that use interviewer administration are worthless." That's one conclusion you can come to. I don't have to subscribe to that conclusion and I'll tell you why in a couple of seconds. But the other point that I want to make here is: Why do we know this? Why do we know there's this discrepancy between the answers you get on self-administered versus interviewer-administered? The answer is: because people who really cared to get it right have done these methodological experiments, and that's how we know there's this problem.

[RT17] Well, the effects seem huge... but are they huge? Well, actually, in absolute terms, they involve very small differences. This two-and-a-half times difference is like the difference between 2.5% and 1%, so in terms of absolute numbers, they *are* huge. And furthermore, in these studies (the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse is a perfect example), this study is a study that's done as a time trend, and so it's not so clear that the distortions you get – you know, the absolute distortions – necessarily affect the time trend analyses.

[RT18] Let me summarize what I said about measurement error. First of all, not all fluctuations across polls are errors. You can't fault the polls when they accurately mirror public opinion and they measure different opinions. Context effects, response order effects, social desirability biases – they're definitely bad things – hate 'em, you know. I've built my whole career on exposing them. [laughter] But their impact, as far as we can tell, doesn't necessarily or doesn't frequently



invalidate the conclusions. And Rich [Morin], I'm told, will say that when we can determine how accurate the results are – in electoral polls, for example – the surveys and polls seem to do well. As for nonresponse error, we'd love to eliminate measurement error, but an imperfect tool isn't necessarily a worthless tool. Let me just conclude by saying it's just as wrong to overstate the errors of surveys as it is to overlook them. Thank you. [applause]

**Jon Krosnick:** Rich Morin is Director of Polling, staff writer and columnist at *The Washington Post*. You all know him. He came to *The Post* in 1987 from the *Miami Herald* where he had directed surveys and research writing there. Before that, he was at the *Arizona Republican* in Phoenix. His work as a reporter and editor has been honored by the American Bar Association, the Association of Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Sigma Delta Chi Society of Professional Journalists, and others. In 1980, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in special investigative reporting. He currently serves on the Board of Directors at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and he has taught journalists about how to report on polls not only in the U.S., but in Taiwan, Mexico City, and South Africa. Please join me in welcoming Rich Morin. [applause]

[Click here to view Morin's power point presentation.](#)

**Rich Morin:** [RM1] Arianna, I loved the concession speech. [inaudible] I'll have to say that I've learned something very important tonight, and it's twice as bad as I feared. There are actually *two* Arianna Huffingtons. [laughter] There's the one that just spoke to us. What a charming woman. She's intelligent, she's witty, she's critical but insightful about polls. She's suspicious of commissioned polls; so am I. She doesn't like silly polls; sometimes I do. (It's a pretty dull life otherwise.) I like this Arianna Huffington.

But then there's the shrieking pundit from hell. [laughter] She writes about polls in a syndicated column under your name. [laughter] Have you ever met this dreadful woman? [laughter] She holds us personally responsible from everything from venal politicians to the September 11 terrorist attacks. She says our polls are increasingly inaccurate. She wants to put us out of business. Actually, you'll employ 90% of us, right? I guess we're okay. [inaudible] And not only

does she urge people to hang up on us, but she wrote it was their constitutional duty to “take pollsters to court.” Wow, where was that Arianna tonight? Arianna, I’ve read all of your columns on polling, and they’re delightful, delightful reads.

[RM2] Her case against the media polls, abusive polls, can be distilled into three claims that I’ll be challenging tonight. The first claim is that media pre-election polls are “increasingly inaccurate” and therefore political poll results are not newsworthy. In fact, no survey results are newsworthy because the one opportunity we have to test the accuracy of a poll by an election return, they often – in Arianna’s mind – fall short. Her second claim is that poll reporters rely on polls as a substitute for other kinds of reporting; they kind of get in the way between us and the people. And finally, that polls constrict the news agenda.

[RM3] In fact, I’ll suggest that a review of the record shows just the opposite when you look at the accuracy of polls. The overall performance of polls in the recent elections has been good. If anything, it’s gotten better. Now, polls aren’t perfect. [laughter] I’ve done some of those. Arianna was kind enough not to mention that was my greatest fear last night at two in the morning. Error is built into the system. However, we try to minimize it. We can accurately characterize public attitudes, but we cannot precisely measure them. So on what does Arianna base her claim of increasing inaccuracy?

[RM4] Let’s first look at her critique of the 2000 presidential tracking polls – surveys conducted up to the election eve that should be expected to produce good results. Did they? Arianna says no. In fact, she says that eight of the ten national survey organizations got it wrong – completely wrong – failing to accurately project Gore’s popular vote victory, and of course, this should be a great source of “embarrassment, shame and regret.” Well, it’ll take more than that to embarrass the news media. [laughter]

[RM5] Let’s look to see how the polls really did in 2000. You don’t have to look too hard. These particular polls are remarkably consistent, looking up and down rows of polls of accurately characterizing one of the closest elections in American history in which Gore won one half of one percent more of the popular vote than George Bush. [RM6] In fact, the summary measures

tell a similarly hopeful story about this poll. The average error on the estimates of the Bush-Gore split was one percentage point – maybe it was a little more – and [...] this set of polls was the third most accurate in history. Arianna can no longer claim wildly inaccurate polls by setting up a wildly false standard. Polls that said Gore was ahead were correct; surveys that didn't were wrong, no matter how close they came. That's fair enough in an election when the actual winner's margin is 10 percentage points. But it's unfair when the margin is 5/10 of a percentage point, well within all of these surveys' margins of sampling error.

Now, here is one of the ways that that standard is unfair. Imagine, imagine in a perfect world that on the day of the election, all of us had reported the same result: 48% for Gore, 48% for Bush. When the votes were eventually counted, we would have looked like prophets. Yet according to Arianna's standard, all ten of us would have been wrong. In fact, pre-election polls in recent years are getting more accurate, not less. [RM7] Here, we're plotting average candidate error from 1936 to 2000, and you can see that the trend is down and certainly in a good direction. But you know, there's some other element to, another element of this equation. Perhaps the problem wasn't the polls; it was those damned reporters, perhaps the way the journalists described the polls that gave Arianna the impression that the polls were so wrong. I read all the stories based on those ten surveys and I found that they were *accurately* characterizing a very, very close race.

Here are some examples. [RM8] Here's how CBS/Newsweek reported their result: “voters was just about evenly divided.” [RM9] Here's how *USA Today* reported their Gallup result: they did “a photo finish.” [RM10] And my good friend and colleague at *The Washington Post*, Dan Balz, looked at our survey and also predicted “an unpredictable finish.” Also note in that second paragraph the sentence that the results based on the last two nights interviewing suggested that the race might be tightening. So these polls accurately characterized the race. The reporters accurately characterized the race. Arianna was a little less accurate in her characterization of the race.

But what happened last year? We tried again. [RM11] Out of 159 governors' polls conducted after October 20, the average candidate error was 2.4% points, and the percentage with the right winner was 87% points. Remember we only got 20% right in 2000, and now we're up to 87%. I

expected that Arianna would be so pleased [laughter] but we still weren't good enough. [RM12] And in fact, somehow we were trending downwards and perhaps she meant upward [laughter]. But perhaps not. Well this is the case of misbehaving polls or possibly a misbehaving pundit.

I will offer a couple of suggestions. [RM13] She concentrated in her column evaluating the 2002 polls on three races – Georgia, Colorado, and Illinois. I won't go into as much detail as I planned to (because you want to ask your good questions), but let me briefly summarize. In the Georgia governor's race, one of the polls that she cited as having shown the wrong person ahead in fact did have the wrong person ahead. But that survey was done *three weeks* before Election Day. [RM14] In no way was that a predictive poll. It didn't do a service to its readers; it didn't do a service to us, but you probably don't care too much about that. But you also raised questions about the [inaudible] when you suggest that a survey done three weeks out is a predictive poll.

In Colorado and Illinois, the situation was a little bit different. The two surveys there that you cited as being bad in fact stunk like hell. [laughter] They were done right up until – right on the eve of the election. They both got the winner wrong. (In Illinois, they called it a tie.) They were both done by John Zogby. [laughter] Now Arianna, if you want to be polling-disciplined and spank John Zogby, I think there are about a hundred people in this room who'd hold him down. [laughter] He's not a favorite.

[RM15] Let me move on to the second claim, that reporters allow surveys to get in the way of other types of reporting, and that basically reporters are lazy. I have a different take on that. I believe that pollsters allow the people to speak for themselves. Now Arianna you claim – and I think correctly so – of wanting to speak for the people. I think that we share that. We want to reflect the public's views. When we do that, we often force me and my colleagues to confront our own biases. And we also challenge the conventional wisdom – and you know this – that so affects Washington and it also serves as a corrective to journalism by adding [inaudible: anecdote? *Rich, pls check this previous sentence.*]. In my business, if it happens once, it's a phenomenon. If it happens twice, it's a trend. If it happens three times, it's a movement. [laughter]

But surveys allow us to get beyond journalism-by-anecdote and that's a good thing. Without polls media would have to go back on relying on politicians, pundits, and campaign operatives who characterize public opinion about political matters. The nature of coverage would change in *only* one way: It would be less accurate. We would still over-report the game, the money game, the endorsement game, the advertising wars. The one thing that would be lost would be the voice of the people. Polling also takes us out of the newsroom and forces us to confront the views of real Americans and to give voice to their concern, and that's a very, very good thing.

[RM16] Onto the third claim quickly – that polls constrict the news agenda. I think exactly the opposite argument. I say surveys *expand* the news agenda. In fact, they make possible some stories that could be done absolutely no other way. You mentioned that 77% Bush approval rating is scaring the Bejesus out of all the Democrats. You know, we gave George Bush and the Republicans plenty of reason to be scared. Besides, the point of those figures was Americans' doubts about his handling of the economy. In any given survey, there's a lot of good measure of support regarding George Bush these days but embedded is a number of cautions that we report along with the good. And stories about the gender gap, the generation gap, the married-single gap could not be done without public opinion polls. And we do far more than just political polls. We've done major projects on gender relations, the Latino experience in America, people's knowledge and understanding of the economy and public affairs, values and religion, spirituality, and that's just the *Washington Post* list. Our colleagues at ABC and our other competitors have a list just as large and just as diverse. Even when the country's attention is focused elsewhere, we're asking questions on a diverse range of topics.

Actually, the example you brought up is a particularly good one of terrorism. [RM17] Now, as Arianna told you, and actually surprisingly, she has her own explanation as to why 9/11 happened. It was the pollsters who have basically given – you know, politicians like shiny numbers and can be easily distracted [laughter], so we distracted politicians away from considering the problem of terrorism and that real leadership – one driven by vision, not polls – would've seen the iceberg lurking beneath “the placid surface of our prosperity.” That's some pretty fancy writing there. [laughter] I'll have to note, however, that Arianna is not one of those people who possesses the vision to see these lurking icebergs because I went back and looked at

her columns that she had written before September 11 and there were exactly three fleeting mentions to terrorism in those five or six years that I looked.

Well, in fact, there's plenty of evidence that many Americans were concerned about terrorism, contrary to what Arianna told us. In fact, there *were* people who could see that iceberg lurking, and it was us. In the 1990s a total of 343 questions were asked by media and polling organizations about terrorism. I pulled out just a couple. [RM18] These are big majorities raising concerns about terrorism. The information, the data were there for politicians to act. Don't blame us for politicians *not* acting. What we need to do is to merely perhaps direct attention to the problems that are identified by surveys.

I'd like to end by raising an issue that Arianna did not in her speech, and that is that she has a campaign called "Campaign for a Poll-Free America" and basically it's an effort to – as I said – put us out of business. She wants people to hang up when we call. She wants people to take us to court if we call back. Basically, she would like to end telephone polls as we know them. I was interested to speculate exactly what that would mean.

What would we lose if there were no more telephone polls? I'd have to go back to being a feature writer, I guess, but that wouldn't be so bad. Let's look at some of the collateral damage that we'd suffer if we lost some telephone surveys. [RM19] We'd lose one of the ten leading economic indicators, which is based on telephone surveys by the University of Michigan. We'd lose the ability to track the unemployment rate, which comes from the Current Population Survey, which is mostly done by telephone. Governments would no longer have the ability to estimate future costs of federal programs, which are based on telephone polls. [RM20] Information about health needs would also be restricted. State local officials would no longer get data to help them set health policy. And we'd no longer track vaccination coverage of children, which comes from a federal telephone poll. [laughter] [RM21] We'd lose other measures as well. We'd lose our most reliable estimate of crime which comes from a survey that is done in large part by telephone. And we'd lose key measures of the educational performance of children. [RM22] Other victims would include our friends and colleagues at the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation who use telephone surveys ostensibly to track the health needs of the elderly, the

plight regarding medical insurance, and teen health. You can look at some other examples from the Commonwealth Fund and the Public Agenda Foundation, to just get an indication of the kinds of things that would get lost if everyone just said no to pollsters.

But you know, I believe Arianna is our friend. [laughter] *I* may not be her friend, but I believe Arianna *is* our friend. I believe that because when she is given the opportunity to set policy, she embraces the polls. [RM23] Arianna was a member of the Task Force on Fair Debates which recommended opening the 2000 presidential debates to candidates who have met any one of the three criteria – registered 5% in national polls [inaudible]. But the question asked is, Not only does Arianna want to make policy polls, she wants to *write* the poll questions! “Do you think the following candidates should be included in the presidential debates?”

Well, you know, of course, three months later Arianna was back spanking the polls, advising her readers that “hanging up on pollsters, taking them to court is your patriotic duty.” Well, you know, I like the Arianna I heard tonight, but if you happen to see that other Arianna [laughter], tell her to stop. Thank you. [applause]

**Jon Krosnick:** Before we open the floor to comments and questions we will give Arianna an opportunity to reply.

**Arianna Huffington:** Okay... (laughter) Where do we start? First of all I thought this was absolutely wonderful. I don't know about you, but I was laughing and I made hundreds of notes. And let me just start by quoting G.K. Chesterton, which I'm sure you all would like to hear [laughter]. He was talking about voting, but it can be extended to polling just to explain why all those great democratic statements were made about how the view of people is expressed in polls is just rubbish. One of the inherent difficulties in polling (I read actually in a book – a previous book I bought for the governor – that has a chapter on polling) is a problem described by G.K. Chesterton with regard to voting, but infinitely more true when it comes to polling. The question, Chesterton wrote, is not so much whether a minority of the electorate votes. The point is that only a minority of the *voter* votes.

The average man votes below himself. He votes with half a mind or with a hundredth part of one. And that's the problem with polling. When you talk to a pollster, you're talking with probably a hundredth part of your mind. You know, how many people really are willing to ponder the questions deeply? And how many are just trying to plow through the exercise as quickly as possible and get back to watching "The Bachelor"? [applause] I mean, the idea that you are really listening to vox populi is just absurd. You know, people who are interrupted in the middle of dinner and talk to strangers for no money are really a little pathological, in my opinion. In fact, I actually think that the problem right now is that basically these polling results are really reached by a small unrepresentative minority of bored and long-haired Americans who have nothing better to do than talk to strangers who interrupt their dinner. And that is a very significant problem.

And the response rate that I know in a very brilliant way you try to make appear is not a problem that response rates are coming down. Well, it must somehow. Your industry thinks it's a problem because they're not putting them out there. Why not put out there the response rate the way you put the size of the sample or the dates of which the survey was conducted? If you don't think it's a problem, *put them out there*. [applause] ... Put them out there.

But I spent a week trying to get them out of pollsters, and I want to tell you how hard it was, and I *didn't* call them at dinnertime. [laughter] I called them during office hours, okay? And nevertheless, here's really the results.

First of all, I had really one question. Why, it was very simply – my question was very simply. "Can you please – I was very polite – give me the response and refusal rates for your most recent national poll?" First, I called ABC News Poll's Jeff Alderman. Is he here?

**Audience member:** He's dead.

**Arianna Huffington:** Oh, I'm sorry.

**Off-screen:** He is too. [laughter]



**Off-screen:** It was probably not your fault. [laughter]

**Arianna Huffington:** Can I continue or would it be better if we move to the next one?

He said... First of all, he said he didn't understand the question. When I repeated it with minor refinements, he growled, "That's proprietary information. I've got another call. Goodbye." In pollster lingo, that was a refusal, but a very revealing one. After all, you know, we weren't asking him if he wanted to change telephone services or presidents. We weren't even calling him, as I said literally, during dinnertime.

But let's move to Tom Reihle of Peter Hart Associates. Okay, he also gave me the proprietary information card and then he told me that the methods at Peter Hart Associates were "our secret recipe." And I quote, "[inaudible]...It's none of my business."

So far, my new poll was batting was zero for two, a 100% refusal rate. But in the spirit of openness, I'm not being proprietary about *my* refusal rates. Then I moved on to CBS' Kathy Frankovic. She turned down to relinquish these refusal data without knowing the information her competitors were giving me. She had to [inaudible] it was a complicated issue, but then, hiding behind complexity and jargon is second nature to many people that Rich was defending. I don't say that in the book, but I will in the next edition. [laughter]

Then I moved on to Gallup and spoke with their senior methodologist Rajesh Srinivasan. Is he here?

**Audience:** No.

**Arianna Huffington:** Maybe I'm mispronouncing it, but I mispronounce a lot of words tonight. He promised to fax me the response rate data right away. And indeed, I did receive *reams* of data right away – for everything except response rates!

A representative from Roper Starch Worldwide told me that the information was unavailable, and finally, Mike Kagay of the *New York Times* gave me an actual response rate (it was 43%) but it wasn't, as I had asked, of the most recent poll, which turned out had a lower response rate. So, that's a very simple request. If response rates don't matter, publish them.

So, moving on to the fact that again, as I predicted was going to happen, as Walter Lippmann said about an ideal world, about what pollsters do in an ideal world, and what politicians would do in an ideal world. But in the real world, there is no real distinction in the minds of the public between John Zogby and Frank Luntz and all the great guys in this room. And that's something which I hope you're taking to heart, because not only are there no distinctions like that.

I don't know if you remember when *Newsweek* published a report by a poll by Gallup, that they pronounced at the time – declared that 83% of Pakistanis had supported the Taliban. It turned out to be Gallup Pakistan that had produced that report, which has nothing to do with the revered Gallup Organization. But not even that distinction was made in *Newsweek*. You may remember that, Rich. And the question is: How can reporters – the same reporters that you are saying are doing a great job – don't ask themselves that question? Is it really reasonable to look at that number and believe it? 83%? I mean, where have these pollsters gone? I mean, have they just found some people who had bought American flags and fuel to burn them and they had asked them about the Taliban? So the question here is the complete credibility given to any number put out there by reporters. That's the problem I have with the way the media report the polls. In fact, they're being reported with the same kind of authority that the ancient Romans gave to reporting chicken entrails. And that's really the problem – in terms of not making distinctions between what is accurate information and what is not – all the distinctions I'm sure are being constantly made in this room and throughout your conference.

So, to go on to the whole issue of war and peace, and you quoted from my latest column of the 77% solution where I quoted the *LA Times* column, the *LA Times* poll that had a 50% approval of invading Iran compared to the Gallup poll that had a 24% approval. You said, for you, this seemed to be absolutely fine because the questions are so differently worded. But you know, in terms of how these poll results were used, it didn't make any distinctions between the questions.

It was simply put forward that either the American people wanted us to invade Iran on one instance or the American people *didn't* want us to invade Iran in another instance.

And for me, the idea of using polls to declare and decide questions of war and peace is really tragic. There's no other word for it. I mean, we saw that in Kosovo. We saw the way the polls were used in Kosovo when during the space of one month, first we heard that the American people were in favor of using ground troops in a permissive or hostile environment. Please don't tell me you think the American people had a clear understanding of what that meant when they were asked that question, because I don't believe they were having a clear understanding.

And then a month later, for some reason, the American people, we were told, were against allowing ground troops in a permissive or hostile environment. And somehow, the Clinton administration changed its policy. And that, to me, is really not something we should be contemplating with equanimity. I mean, it's one thing to ask the public if they want school uniforms, which was not a specialty of the Clinton administration and Dick Morris – all those itsy-bitsy issues that really make no difference to anybody's life, but make the president have his issues which have over 70% approval rating.

But to move to war and peace, or to move to the major issues that you're describing, like civil rights. I mean, just imagine if Dick Morris had been the pollster of Abraham Lincoln, head of the White House. You can see Dick walking into the Oval Office and telling the president, "Mr. President, you'd better not sign the Emancipation Proclamation. It would bring your approval rating down by 20 points. Why don't you sign something that everybody can be in favor of, like Secretary's Day?" [laughter] And that was the case with the Clinton administration in a nutshell: itsy-bitsy initiatives that nobody was really against and made no real difference to any people left out of our prosperity and the good times. I mean, just look at what happened. All we've seen [inaudible] the beginnings of the corporate scandals that have plagued us now in the years that we're living in now, and that nobody predicted, no poll predicted.

And to say that the polls predicted terrorism – you know, I'm sorry, but if you look at what was being disseminated by the polls being perpetrated by the media, being discussed, there was no

discussion of terrorism as a major issue facing this country. We compared column inches to column inches all the other issues that are being discussed. And I want us to move to the Q & A, so let me just make one last plea for leadership and do it by mentioning capital punishment.

Capital punishment was one of those issues that no politician *dared* be against. I mean, Bill Clinton... That was get one of the seminal moments of how poll-driven he was... that he went back to Arkansas to preside over putting to death a mentally deformed man. Do you remember that? That was one of the low points of this man's career. And then we saw leadership in the form of Governor Reilly of Illinois and the numbers are changing about capital punishment, and the numbers are changing because there is leadership put forward. And before that, that was just fear and cowardice which is really what is dominating American politics at the moment, and I'm very troubled by it. And I feel that anything that enables that cowardice and enables that spinelessness that we see – and absolutely I'm so contemptuous of it, I cannot even begin to tell you – is something to be avoided.

And that's why I don't mind any of the polling surveys that you mentioned, Rich – all the good consumer surveys and all that. I have just one target and that is the things that politicians can use, and they're not going to use your employment surveys and all that. They don't really care about that. They're just going to use what they think the public is going to respond to in order to get them elected. That's really the issue: What's going to get them elected? And the only thing that they ultimately understand is punishment, which means what are the issues that are going to keep them out of office or not get them into office? And that is really ultimately what is behind this – the addiction of politicians to polls and the way it is undermining democracy. Thank you.

**Question 1:** I'm Susan Carol Losch. I'm from Florida State University and we read your column in the *Tallahassee Democrat*. I was interested in your use of "distinction" and I was interested in all the examples that Rich put forward. Several years ago, my husband and I were eating out with my younger stepson. He was 13 at the time, and when the waitress asked him his age, he said that he was under 12. I waited for a minute, and I said, "Wait a minute! He's 13 years old." When the waitress left, my stepson turned to me and said, "How could you humiliate me like this?!" And I said, "You know what? Josh is 13 and I don't think he knows how to distinguish between

telling the truth to his family and lying to everyone else. So at this point, I just assume that he didn't lie.”

I work with two areas, one of which has been the Behavioral Risk Factor Survey. I've asked people how much they've weighed, I've asked them about their cigarette usage. I'm also working with the National Science Foundation Surveys of Public Understanding of Science and Technology which is of tremendous use to educators. And what I have to ask you is: When you say to people to say no to polls, do they distinguish between the good polls that you yourself admit provide valuable services and the bad polls that don't? And if you say to people just to “say no to polls,” won't they say no to them all? [applause]

**Arianna Huffington:** Well I'm actually very specific. I tell them very specifically that it's definitely okay to talk to pollsters in social settings [laughter], and specifically say no to polls that are about the political questions of the day. And I think the distinction is very clear. If they get involved about who they're going to vote for, or what issue they think is most important in the next election, or any of those clearly political polls. These are political polls. They are not consumer surveys, or any of the other things that you have been praising, and I agree with you have some value.

**Rich Morin:** Arianna, I think differently. In fact, if you go to Arianna's website, to the “Campaign for a Poll-Free America” –

**Arianna Huffington:** It's actually a crusade. [laughter] You see the distinction? Actually, it's even in the section called “Crusades,” and I underline it. You can't miss it, Rich.

**Rich Morin:** – and what you will not see is the distinction between the type – the kinds of distinctions that Arianna is making now. And when I saw that, I immediately objected and wondered and that's what spurred my thinking about it. And while you can present it as a nuanced plea, at some point it's just speeches, because how do people know what questions you're going to ask when they're called to participate in a public opinion poll?

**Arianna Huffington:** But you know, Rich, if you read *any* of my columns – and I know you have – there hasn't been any attack in any of my columns of in-depth surveys of the kind you are describing. They are absolutely focusing on political opinion polls, and that is unequivocal.

**Rich Morin:** And so the simple solution is to make that caveat part of your website and make it part of your presentation, and when you – I wish I had photocopies of all of your columns because in column after column you simply say the polls are wrong. “Refuse to participate in public opinion polls,” not making that distinction. I will grant you that your argument is based on misuse of polls by politicians but the claims that you make and the remedy that you seek applies to *all* polls, and all I'm asking is go ahead and whack us and whack the politicians (without question) *but* make the kind of distinctions in your columns that you're making now. Simply say “Don't participate in political polls. Don't do that, but do participate in some of the surveys that I mentioned.” And I think you're wrong too in assuming that the polls that I cited were not used to make policy. All of these are very much designed to provide information for policy-makers to set policy, far more than ... [inaudible]

**Jon Krosnick:** Thank you, Rich. [applause]

**Question 2:** I'm the aforementioned Mark Mellman. [laughter] I am delighted that you all and Arianna could get together and decide that we were really the enemy and resolve your differences. But I really wanted to hear your thoughts [inaudible] ... In the spirit of that, I'd like to make three quick points in the form of a question and the question is, Don't you agree with me? [laughter] You talked about the responsibility of pollsters to ask fair questions. So, for example, you cite the Colombia poll which never mentions Colombia. “Do you have to publish – do you columnists have the responsibility to cite those polls correctly and accurately?” is question number one.

Number two: We do a lot of polls on commission including for people like the National Center for Child Poverty and for organizations that look into people's attitudes towards education in California, the cuts in education and teachers that you mentioned. What responsibility do you have to report those polls because neither you nor frankly any of the other media have chosen to

report a whole series of polls on exactly the topics that you said pollsters ought to be focusing on. So what responsibility do you have to report those polls?

The third question – it’s hard to put in the form of a question really – was to suggest that the real cause of spinelessness in politicians – to the extent there is some, and we can argue how much there is, how much there isn’t. I would suggest it’s not so much the polls in the sense of surveys; it’s the polls in the sense of *democracy*. Politicians face the voters. For better or for worse, most politicians want to get re-elected. Long before polls existed, politicians attempted to divine public opinion in a whole variety of ways. So is the ultimate remedy that you suggested, that we should end democracy, that we shouldn’t allow politicians to consider public opinion in developing their positions on issues?

**Arianna Huffington:** [inaudible] question, but let me take them in order. First of all, I have here the exact questions, Mark, that you asked in that Lockheed Martin commissioned poll and it was even more interesting than I said. It actually asks whether voters would support \$2 billion being spent on, and I’m quoting, tracking planes, and it didn’t say “Lockheed Martin tracking planes.” It actually says “tracking planes to be flown in drug-producing areas.” So it wasn’t just any kind of plane, it was a *given* for tracking plane! [??] I mean, how much more commissioned can a poll get?!

Then your other question about why aren’t the polls about education and school shortages in California being used, and that’s exactly my point. They are not being used by politicians who’d rather promote tax cuts and other polls that are in favor of all these tax cuts are being used. That’s exactly the point that I’ve been trying to make.

And your last point about how do you divine public opinion. Let me remind you that leadership is not just about divining public opinion. Leadership is about building a consensus based on what you believe and what your vision is for this country and it’s so forgotten now that we don’t even mention it. It’s not just about giving people what they want; it’s about looking around the corner at what they need and then seeing if you can start to build a consensus around it. If you don’t build a consensus, you don’t get elected. Guess what? There are worse things in life than not

getting elected, except for most of the existing crop of politicians, there aren't because their getting elected has become equivalent to their surviving.

**Question 3:** I'm Colleen Porter. I'm a survey researcher at the University of Florida. I'm an editorial writer for the *Gainesville Sun* and other *New York Times* regional newspapers and also a former Census Bureau interviewer. And you know, when I came here tonight, I thought maybe that we pollsters might be criticized or even get insulted. I guess I didn't expect that our *respondents* would be denigrated the way they have been. You know, I've done interviews in wooden shacks that were unpainted and had no electricity. I've been very graciously given information in interviews in the nicest houses in town and all these people were willing to take time out of their lives – their very busy lives – to talk to me and I guess the reason is that we *respect* our respondents. We respect our respondents, we appreciate them. How do you think you're going to convince people to follow, to join your crusade when you've denigrated them the way you did?

**Arianna Huffington:** Well, I don't actually think that I denigrated them. I think that people have a better use for their time – frankly, in many cases – than answering questions by people that they don't know, for reasons that they don't know how they're going to be used. So that's what I'm saying. I mean, I don't know how many of you actually answer pollsters' questions, but I just wouldn't. I just wouldn't take the time to answer a pollster's question. I mean, that's really my – the way I value my time. I mean, I'm not saying that to denigrate myself any more than I'm saying it to denigrate others.

**Question 4:** Thank you for coming here tonight. I'm Mike Davern and I am with the University of Minnesota and I have two questions, one that just came up recently here. The first one is - which is the most immediate one that I just thought of - if you encourage people not to participate in polls and they (polls) are so powerful in the political arena, aren't you in effect shutting down your end of the spectrum as far as what you believe in and what you're arguing for? That was question number one.



Let me go to question two real quick because I probably won't get a chance to get the microphone back. Number two is; I hear your criticism as somewhat misdirected. I think I'm hearing you criticize the communication of the polls as our fault. But it's not really the polls themselves that we're producing, it's people who communicate the information who really do a disservice in communicating. So, in other words, it's not necessarily us, the producers of it, but it's the communicators, or the journalists who are in turn using the information that we provide in ways that they shouldn't be using it. Thank you.

**Arianna Huffington:** Yes, I absolutely agree with you and I think that I said that again and again. It *is* the way they are being used in the real world. We *are* talking about the real world and that's how they're being used and the distinction that you make between polls taken *just* before an election that have predictive value, and polls that are taken three weeks before the election that have *no* predictive value is a completely [inaudible] distinction about how polls are used.

When you have a poll taken three months, let alone three weeks, before an election – Hardball, or Pete O'Reilly, or any other show – they're not saying, you know, "We're giving you this at the head of our newscast. Do *not* think this has any predictive value. Just wait for the poll taken just before the election." You know, I'm sorry, that's not how these are disseminated. That's not how they are seen, and I know you're talking about over-integrity [overt integrity?], the results, and that's all that's going on. There is no integrity. There is only over-integrity [overt integrity?] and assigning it an [inaudible] amount of meaning to [inaudible]... we have no meaning. [inaudible] You said again and again that you claim that what I'm saying is inaccurate. I'm certainly accurate because I did not make the distinction the way the public is making a distinction between polls that were taken the day before, or two weeks, or three weeks before, and how they got it wrong three weeks before really the only [inaudible] ... Congress raising money or the perception about the race as it was disseminated in that state.

**Rich Morin:** I read that story about that Mason Dixon survey – two stories – and in *no* way was that recorded as a *prediction* of the election outcome. At the *Washington Post* we use something different – a lot of other newspapers do this as well – [inaudible] to critics like you. On state and local surveys – election surveys – we don't track. It's a lot of money to get basically one number

and, you know, it goes away. You don't learn anything except who's going to win two hours later. So we invest our money in surveys that stories that were published a full week in Sundays before the election, before the first full week to set up that election at the final week of the campaign – what issues matter, what voters saw support, what voters *may* move, and how they may move. There *is* horse-race that is the prism through which you see and which gives meaning to all these other results. It is not a predictor. On the contrary, we go to great lengths to emphasize that it's not. Now, I *know* the stories based on *those* surveys do not predict the outcome because I write those stories.

**Arianna Huffington:** You know, you're not the only one writing those stories. I'm sorry, but I'm quoting directly from the story written in Georgia at the time, and it was written as though they were predicting that Democratic Governor Roy Barnes would beat challenger Sonny Perdue handily. According to the Mason-Dixon poll, "Barnes is leading by nine points." That's how this story is written. I'm sorry, you are [inaudible] – I can show you dozens of stories that write that he's leading, he's leading. It's taken by the public to mean, "I predict, he's going to win." You know, I'm sorry, that's how these things are interpreted.

**Rich Morin:** Well, there are no very bad reporters. [laughter] Yes, there *are* some people who do that and have done that, and you can show me – you can collect hundreds of examples, and I can collect far more. I mean, again it's this anecdote –pick out one bad poll and then all polls are bad; pick out one bad survey story and then we're all tarred. I think that's – that doesn't serve us too well.

**Roger Tourangeau:** How would we know how people are interpreting the polls unless we did a survey!?! [laughter] Seriously!

**Jon Krosnick:** On that note, Arianna has promised me that she will be the last one to go to bed tonight and will be happy to spend the evening talking with us all. Before I give you our parting gift, I want to ask you one small favor. Could you raise your right hand? [laughter] Put your left hand on the program book for this conference [laughter, applause] and repeat after me: "I, Arianna Huffington –"

**Arianna Huffington:** I, Arianna Huffington – which one? The good one or the bad one?  
[laughter, applause]

**Jon Krosnick:** I want 'em both! "... will never again try to kill off all survey researchers."

**Arianna Huffington:** I've never tried to kill off all survey researchers! [laughter, applause]

**Jon Krosnick:** Thank you all for coming. [laughter, applause]