

commentary

from other pens...

Influence of polls leads to value debate

Polls play an increasingly powerful role in the public's perception of political campaigns. People disagree about whether that's a good thing. Critics say the high number of pre-election polls distracts the public from the campaign issues, limits the topics candidates are willing to discuss and shuts out some candidates who should be taken seriously. Defenders say there is a market for polls, and they help the public follow campaigns as well as keeping those races in perspective. Pollsters and political scientists gathered recently for a conference on polls sponsored by the Gallup Organization and the University of Nebraska. The meetings produced spirited debate on whether the understanding of campaigns is helped by the growing number of pre-election polls, especially daily tracking polls on who is ahead. "The marketplace wants pre-election polls," said Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallup poll. "Editors and producers who are responsible journalists want polling and think it's important." Newport told the group that poll information provides a systematic way of determining how people feel about issues and candidates, and the public is curious about the findings. "That's because citizens like to compare and contrast their thoughts," Newport said. "People want to know what the scorecard is."

In the 2000 presidential election, there were plenty of scorecards to watch. More than a half-dozen tracking polls were released daily or weekly on the progress of the presidential campaign as well as hundreds of campaign polls that were released less often.

Some say those polls do not necessarily provide a better understanding of campaigns, even if there is a public demand for them. "Teen-agers have a demand for alcohol and cigarettes," said Susan Herbst, a political scientist at Northwestern University, who outlined some critical views of polling during the Gallup session. "A set of smart, ambitious men, built the polling industry and cultivated a demand for polls." Her main complaints about the effects of pre-election polls: —They tend to dominate campaign coverage and affect descriptions of how candidates are performing on the campaign trail. For example, if a candidate trailing in the polls stumbles climbing on a podium, that misstep is used as a metaphor for the candidate's campaign problems. —They tend to limit what issues candidates talk about because some issues are described as more important. For example, presidential candidates in 2000 talked mostly about domestic issues. —They tend to reinforce the strength of well-known candidates and keep lesser known candidates with potentially good ideas out of the mix. Heavy reliance on tracking polls late in the campaign focuses coverage on "the horse race," and tends to reduce the polls that examine why people feel as they do, said Tom Rosentiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. If polls are relied on too heavily, he said, then "all we are left with is citizens' response to the pollsters' view of society."

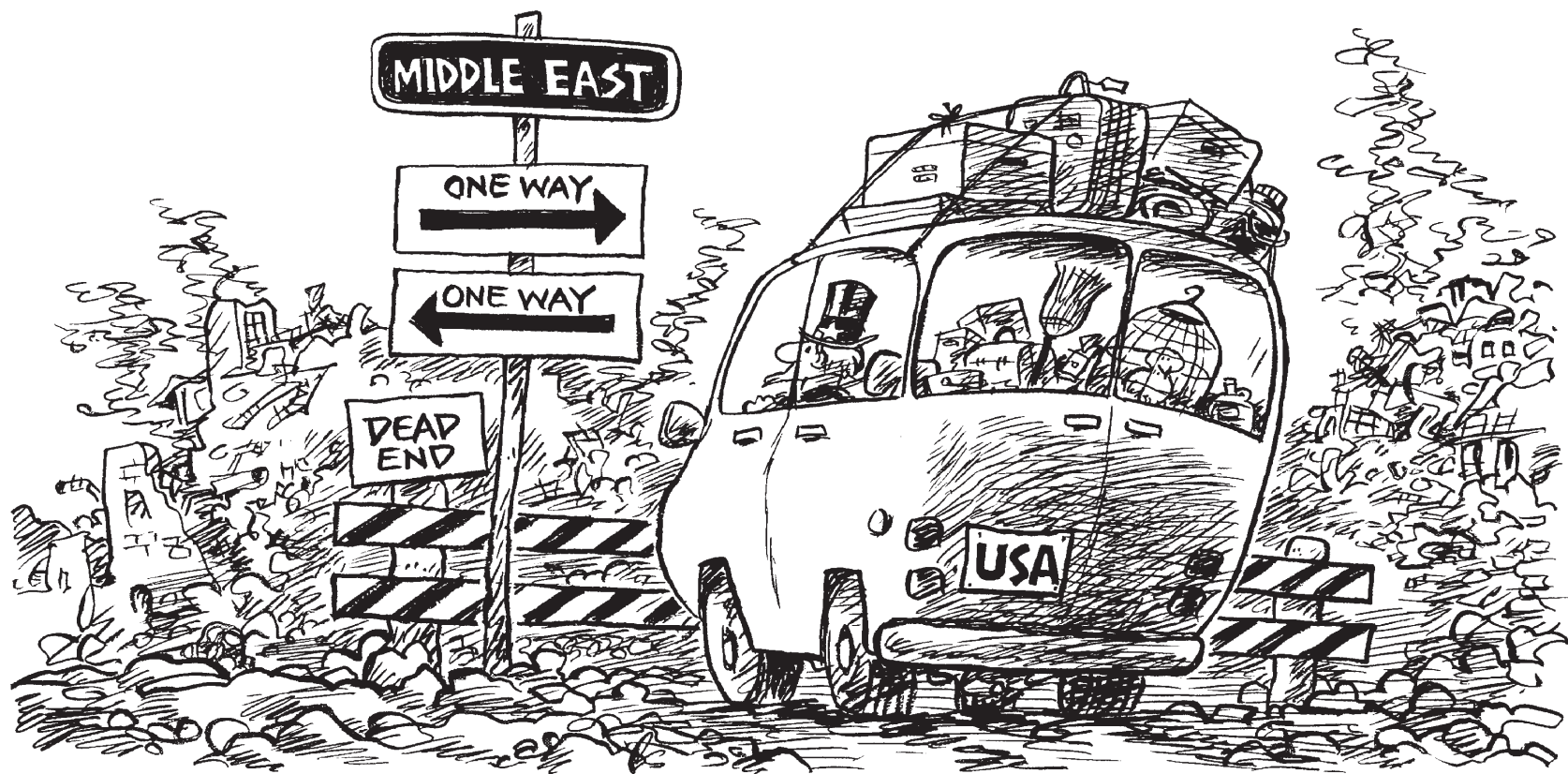
Polls are valuable at telling what the public knows about key issues and when the public begins to tune into those issues, said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Other questions can be less useful, she said. "The downside of polling is that it prompts us to treat unformed opinion as if it is informed opinion," she said.

Such polls match President Bush, a popular wartime president, against a Democrat who may or may not run for president, or match the 2000 Democratic nominee Al Gore against a series of lesser known Democrats. Not surprisingly, Bush and Gore tend to dominate such matchups.

Those who study politics may prefer a more detailed view of campaigns than the general public, said Charles Franklin of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"People who are involved in politics grossly overestimate the public's appetite for political news," Franklin said. "Polls do a good job of giving you a quick simplification of what the public is thinking."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for *The Associated Press*.



Time to remember, thank Mom

I don't know about you, but I see it's almost Mother's Day again. Time to miss my mother and wish she were still physically in my life.

Time to remember all the good times — and all the times I could have done better — for her and for me.

My mother sacrificed for me. That's a rather outdated concept, isn't it? But both my parents did without things to make sure we have enough.

I wish I had realized that earlier in my life; it only dawned on me in my high school years. I never remember being hungry. I always had clothes to wear, and special things for special occasions like prom.

But I have no idea what all was given up so that I might have them. If nothing else, they gave up a lot of their own dreams.

I feel fortunate to have lived the era I have. Mothers stayed home with their children, clothes were just something to wear, brand names weren't



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so important, fathers didn't often desert their families, parents usually stayed married, children didn't "own" the family's phone line, the drug problem hadn't invaded the heartland, households had strict rules and the children respected them, we knew we were loved even without having to hear the words, no stereo or TV until I was married, etc.

Ours was a lower-middle-class household, but so were those of most of my friends'. If there was bullying going on at school, I was oblivious to it. I always knew who I was and to whom I belonged.

When it was my turn to be a mom, I looked to my mother and mother-in-law for role models. I thought they'd done a good job, and who could

know more about it than they?

I didn't accept an "expert's" opinion over my mother's. I resorted to Dr. Spock only when Mom was hundreds of miles away and couldn't be reached by phone. I probably wanted not only advice but some assurance at the same time. I wanted to be a good mother, but also realized I didn't know everything or have all the answers.

What better place to look than at mothers who also loved my children? Mother's Day makes me happy/sad. If I could mother my own children again, I'd do a lot of things differently. But I did the best I could at that time.

They couldn't have had more love — more cuddling, more being heard, more spoiling maybe — but not more love.

If your mother is alive, call and tell her how much her efforts have meant to you. If your mother isn't with you anymore, remember her with fondness and above all — cut her a little slack. She probably did the best she knew how to do.

Seniors need a Medicare deal, not Medicare war

More than 90 percent of American seniors would participate in the prescription drug plan proposed by House Republicans, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has found — a judgment that ought to give pause to Democrats.

The two parties last week unveiled rival proposals, launching the 2002 Medicare war in earnest, but the CBO finding — still unofficial — should encourage both sides to find common ground.

Instead of just dismissing the \$350 billion GOP plan as inadequate and underfunded, Democrats ought to give it serious consideration as a model, perhaps enriching it to achieve even more acceptance.

Ways and Means Chairman Bill Thomas (R-Calif.) told me in an interview that the CBO had scored his proposal as likely to gain 93 percent acceptance from seniors.

CBO officials confirmed that their preliminary analysis shows that the Thomas plan would come in at that level, though an official judgment would await actual introduction of a bill.

The CBO finding undercuts the charge made by Democrats and their allies in the AARP that Thomas' plan would be widely rejected by seniors because it requires them to pay a \$35 to \$40 monthly premium if their income exceeds about \$15,000 a year.

AARP conducted a poll last year showing that 69 percent of seniors would not pay such a premium. A Senate Democratic plan favored by AARP calls for a \$25 premium.

Thomas' proposal would cost \$350 billion in its first 10 years. The plan outlined by Sens. Bob Graham (D-Fla.) and Zell Miller (D-Ga.) would cost \$425 billion over six years.

Instead of planning to iron out differences, the two parties seem intent on making political points with their plans in order to appeal to seniors in the 2002 elections.

Thomas touted his proposal as representing "a permanent new entitlement for seniors," deriding the Democratic alternative as "a gimmick" because it expires.

"The Democrats are building a front-end model that looks good," he said, noting that it "can't be sustained" for budget reasons. He predicted that



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Graham's plan would actually cost \$1 trillion over 10 years — money the country doesn't have.

Democrats countered that one major reason money is tight is President Bush's \$1.6 trillion tax cut plan, which Thomas championed and wants to make permanent at a cost of perhaps \$4 trillion over the next decade.

And, they said that his prescription drug plan contains a fatal "doughnut" or "hole" that would require some seniors to pay premiums but get no benefit in return.

The barbs suggest that a stalemate is brewing. Prescription drugs are the basis of modern medicine, and members of both parties agree that lack of drug coverage under Medicare is the problem they hear most about from their constituents. But, the two parties seem more inclined to exploit the issue politically than to solve it.

Thomas acknowledged to me that he hasn't consulted Democrats in devising it.

He said his legislative procedure is to "figure out what a conference agreement would look like and pass it out of the House — primarily with Republican votes, because Democrats don't want to do anything."

Following this pattern, Republicans plan to push Thomas' Medicare bill through the House before Memorial Day, but it stands little chance in the Senate.

Conceivably, a Democratic measure such as the Graham bill — or an alternative being drafted by Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.) — could pass the Senate.

But, it's hard to see the two sides resolving their differences.

Democrats look upon Medicare as a key item in their 2002 campaign strategy. The more domestic issues such as health, education, the environment and Social Security that dominate debate, they figure, the better off they are.

A recent Democracy Corps poll showed that voters trust Republicans more than Democrats on the economy and taxes, but they trust Democrats more than the GOP by a 23-point margin on health, prescription drugs and the environment.

On Medicare, Democrats are offering not only a lower premium, but also no deductible. Under Thomas' bill, seniors with incomes above \$15,000 would pay the first \$250 of their drug bills.

Under his standard coverage plan (seniors would have a choice of several coverage options), the government would pay 80 percent of drug costs from \$251 to \$1,000 and 50 percent from \$1,000 to \$2,000. But from \$2,000 to \$5,000, seniors would have to pay their entire bills. That's the "doughnut" that Democrats condemn.

Seniors "continue to pay premiums, but they don't get any benefit," Daschle said last week. "This gap would be devastating for most seniors." No gap in coverage exists in the Democratic plan. The government would pay all costs above \$5,000 in the Thomas plan and above \$4,000 in Graham's.

A Thomas aide said it isn't true that seniors would get no help if their drug bills fell between \$2,000 and \$5,000. They would get the benefit of lower drug costs — 25 to 30 percent lower, he said — achieved through group bargaining.

Republicans admit that Thomas' plan isn't "perfect," but claim "the perfect shouldn't be the enemy of the good." It's a good argument that should work in all directions. Politicians should be judged on how hard they try to produce a drug plan for seniors this year — not on how hard they work to create an election issue.

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

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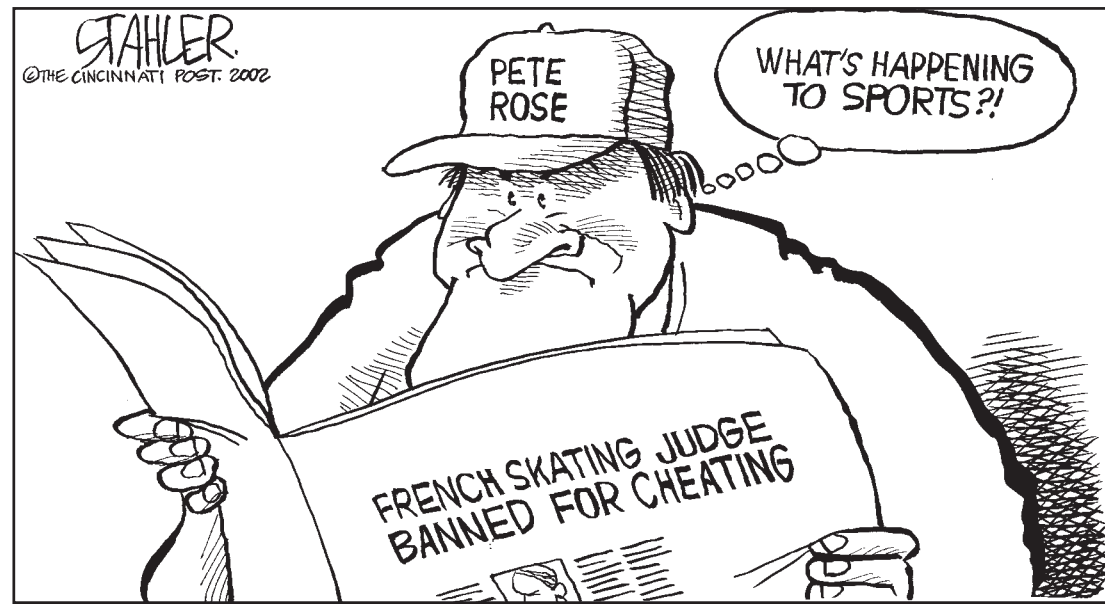
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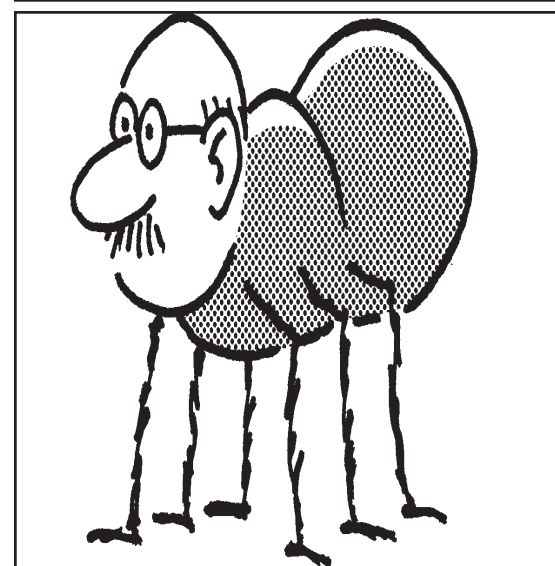
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