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The State of State Polls: Old Challenges, New Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The prospect of a full complement of regularly-conducted, publicly-released state-level polls has both excited and eluded scholars of state politics and public opinion for decades. Here, we examine the current status of state-level polling in the U.S. Specifically, we rely on interviews with 51 state poll directors to investigate the location, frequency, scope, budget, purpose, content, and perceived policy impact of such projects. We also explore the still challenging prospect of greater state-to-state collaboration. We conclude that while current state polling is a robust industry, calls for greater collaboration remain unheeded largely because of limited resources and the incompatible reward structures of project directors. Still, improved data-archiving together with regional polling projects on hot-button topics would serve to diminish such challenges.

SCHOLARS OF U.S. STATE POLITICS have been in the data-scrounging business for decades (Jewell 1982). While basic demographic measures (e.g., annual income, educational attainment, employment rates, etc.) are widely available at the state, county, and city level, political information taken for granted at the national level (e.g., legislative roll-call votes, revenue and expenditure ledgers, campaign contributions, etc.) remained unrecorded and/or ill-organized in all but the most professionalized state capitals through the 1990s. Even now, projects requiring state-level records created prior to the spread of electronic data storage are daunting (see Brace and Jewett 1995; and, for example, Wright and Clark 2005). Public opinion data of the subnational sort have proved particularly elusive. Certainly the technological

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advances and cost reductions of the past decade have allowed subnational polling projects to proliferate. Yet most contemporary efforts to monitor people's attitudes at the state level remain narrow in scope (i.e., conducted in only one state) or are carried out by campaigns, parties, or media outlets, most of which have little incentive to track more than the latest horserace, much less to share, and preserve, their methods and raw data.

The absence of a full complement of regularly-conducted, publicly-released, policy-rich state polls is unfortunate for several reasons. First, systematically-collected public opinion data would, and should, be of interest to the policymakers, journalists, and scholars of any one state. Without them, subnational policy actors are left to depend on their state's most active interest groups, largest industries, and loudest constituents for articulation of the public's preferences. In this sense, survey data continue to act as instruments of a "more direct and expanded democracy" (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg 1949, 584). Second, state responsibility for making or implementing the nation's major domestic policy programs, including healthcare, education, transportation, crime control, and economic development, has increased in recent decades, making regular efforts to measure, track, and publicize citizen preference at that level particularly important. Finally, the relative ease with which state samples are now collected, at least by campaigns and marketing firms, frustrates those with a scholarly interest in both public opinion and comparative state politics. We have long been anxious to see such tools applied to our beloved laboratories of democracy, for academic as well as governance purposes. Only then will we be able to push "studies of opinion and electoral behavior on the state level" out of their "infancy" (Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1985, 470).

STATE POLLS AND STATE POLL RESEARCH: A BRIEF HISTORY

Certainly there are reasons to be optimistic about such a prospect. After all, a handful of regular state polls date back to the 1940s, including the nation's oldest (the Iowa Poll), which has been conducted regularly by the *Des Moines Register* since 1943 (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg 1949). A second crop sprouted three decades later, spurring the 1980 formation of the National Network of State Polls (NNSP) to facilitate cooperative state-level survey research (Jewell 1980a). Although the network's archive (housed at the University of North Carolina's Odum Institute) includes data for just three states from the 1970s (California, Kentucky, and North Carolina), twelve additional states contributed findings in the 1980s (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana,

Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island, Texas, and Virginia), and another eight did so in the 1990s (Arkansas, Arizona, Maryland, Minnesota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Wyoming). Between 2000 and 2005, however, only one state, Oregon, was added to the database while eight were no longer archiving with NNSP.

This spotty showing is hardly a new problem. State politics scholar Malcolm Jewell (1982, 682) noted with evident exasperation that most state surveys were conducted by "nonacademic polling organizations" unwilling to make their work widely available. Moreover, he lamented, "the costs of surveys and the realities of sampling make it almost prohibitive" to conduct the collaborative state polling projects most likely to produce the generalizable findings of greatest value to the academic set (Jewell 1982, 644). While Jewell was joined in the early 1980s by Stephen Salmore of Rutgers University, Michael Baer of the University of Kentucky, and several others in an effort to launch a cooperative state polling network to remedy the situation, the task proved difficult. Despite a coordination meeting in January of 1980 and the use of a three-minute common module in seven states just a few months later, a review of 25 years of NNSP's newsletter reveals a vibrant communication network for individual polling projects but little evidence of a long-lasting experiment in coordinated question batteries and multi-state analysis (Jewell 1980b; NNSP 2005).

That is not to say that scholarly, particularly collaborative, studies of state public opinion have not materialized; rather, it is to note that while the qualitative observations of V.O. Key (1949), Daniel Elazar (1966), and others laid a firm foundation for studying the states, subsequent efforts have been frustrated by a lack of comparable state-level survey data. Notable exceptions include the Comparative State Elections Project (CSEP), which included thirteen state-based surveys and seemed to suggest hope for the field in the late 1960s (Black, Kovenock, and Reynolds 1974), as well as the seven-state project noted above and the multi-state Heartland Poll conducted by the University of Iowa's Social Science Institute in the late 1980s (Squire 1993). While the latter project proved particularly fruitful in an academic sense, further comparative studies based on collaborative polling efforts have been rare, generally taking the form of one-time efforts involving a handful of states and a small battery of questions (see Donovan, Parry, and Bowler 2005).

It should be noted of course that numerous scholars have worked around the problem by making good use of well-crafted single-state studies (e.g., Lupia 1994; Schneider and Jacoby 2003) or by diligently cobbling together datasets which imitate the multi-state collection of (semi-)coordinated public opinion surveys many envision.[1] One of the most influential works in state

politics—Erickson, Wright, and McIver's *Statehouse Democracy*—relies, for example, on national survey data collected by major news organizations and painstakingly disaggregated by the authors to the state level (1993). A similar approach has been used to expand the utility of the Senate National Election Studies (SNES) (Norrander 2000, 2001; Norrander and Wilcox 2006), the General Social Survey (GSS) (Brace et al. 2002; Arceneaux 2002), and Gallup data (Erickson 1976). Still others have relied on careful pairings of electoral results and census data (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2002) as well as on surrogate measures (Berry et al. 1998; Hero and Tolbert 1996) and simulated state opinions (Weber and Shaffer 1972; Weber et al. 1972–73). Mixing methods has also proven fruitful, especially as employed by Berkman and Plutzer, who incorporate both disaggregated, multi-year GSS data and state-specific imputations into their path breaking "small polity inference" estimation technique (2005).

Jeffrey Cohen's *Public Opinion in State Politics* (2006) supplies a rich, contemporary collection of resourceful approaches such as these. Each contributor endeavors, mightily, to apply available data toward analyzing the causes and consequences of state public opinion. Pooled GSS and SNES data, as well as national media polls on state topics, make appearances throughout the volume, as does the 1989–90 National Survey on Latinos in America and data mined from the NNSP archives. Further, closing chapters by Park, Gelman, and Bafumi (2006) and Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) demonstrate exciting advances in the simulation of state-level public opinion; importantly, they supply estimates for each state that capture shorter time intervals than earlier work has allowed. Still, the contributors pine for "surveys for all 50 states [that] would provide the most powerful research design" (Hamman 2006, 87). Even a "multilevel logistic regression model for a binary response variable conditional on post-stratification cells to estimate state-level opinions from national surveys" (Park, Gelman, and Bafumi 2006, 211) remains "a second-best substitute for the real thing" (Erickson 1976, 25).

One project which has brought together fragments of the real thing (i.e., public opinion data properly collected within each of the fifty states) is the U.S. Officials' Job Approval Ratings (JAR) dataset compiled by a Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman (2002). Consisting of several decades of state-level public figure approval ratings as reported by commercial, media, and university organizations, JAR was a massive undertaking but today includes only the aggregated results of each poll. The authors lament that "trying to collect, systemize, and maintain more than 2,600 [complete] datasets would have been a logistical and administrative nightmare," noting that many of the "datasets no longer exist," that just "collecting the approval ratings was a formidable task,"

and that even then the result was "more heterogeneous in character than one might like" (Beyle, Niemi, and Siegelman 2002, 217).[2] Still, interested scholars made good use of this resource (see Beyle, Niemi, and Siegelman 2002; Anderson and Newmark 2002; Dometrius 2002; Barth and Ferguson 2002; and Cohen and King 2006).

While such efforts are commendable, it is clear that the hopes and predictions of the state public opinion pioneers have yet to be realized. Not only has Jewell's 25–year-old wish that "the number of state polls that participate (in coordinated activity) will be expanded" (1980b, 14) remained just that, but Jones and Miller's expectation that "indigenous, state-based polls will become the primary source for additional data for scholars in the future" also falls far short of reality (1984, 1184). In this article, we examine the current status of state-level polling in the U.S. Specifically, we rely on interviews with 51 state poll directors (in 35 states) to investigate the location, frequency, scope, budget, purpose, content, and perceived policy impact of projects meeting the pre-established criteria described below. We also examine and attempt to explain the still daunting prospect of greater interstate collaboration.

METHODS: POLLING THE POLLSTERS

Technology that is both faster and cheaper together with a pair of superheated presidential elections at the onset of the 21st century has resulted in an explosion of state-level polling.[3] Much of it, however, is of the purely horserace variety. News, partisan, and for-profit polling outfits generally seek solely to gauge the candidate preferences of likely voters. Even more, question wording, sampling and interviewing techniques, and the data itself often remain proprietary to the pollster, candidate, or political party. Here, we are interested in state polls that overcome such limitations to provide scholars, policymakers, and journalists with opportunities for measuring, modeling, and understanding public opinion at the state level and in the long-term. Specifically, we established two criteria for inclusion in our study. First, polls had to be regularly conducted efforts to examine the public's attitudes on policy and politics in that state. We defined "regularly" as at least biennially and included only projects that respondents considered currently active and relatively broad in scope. Second, poll directors must make their methods, results, and data publicly available; we were somewhat flexible, however, about how and when such disclosure and data-sharing might occur (e.g., raw datasets might be made available only by request or after a moratorium of several months to a year).[4] Although we considered other qualifying characteristics—such as nonprofit status, a data-sharing mission,

and membership in the NNSP, the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers (AAPOR), or the National Council on Public Polls—we rejected them as unnecessarily restrictive.

To increase the odds of finding active state polling projects fitting these criteria, we started with a recently-updated list of NNSP members posted on the organization's website (http://survey.research.uky.edu/nnsp/). Because most listings contain links to members' homepages, we were able to follow these to double-check contact name and numbers. When such links were inactive, we simply searched components of the NNSP contact information (e.g., institutional affiliation or researcher name) until we found the active website.[5] We likewise mined the blue book listings provided by AAPOR, recording the contact information of affiliates for states in which we had not already obtained at least two likely respondents. This combined approach yielded 77 potential interviewees. Finally, we supplemented the NNSP/AAPOR-generated contacts by closing each interview with a request that the respondent direct us to other projects.[6] This referral method produced more than three dozen additional contacts (Goodman 1961; Welch 1975).[7]

FINDING: PATTERNS IN U.S. STATE POLLING

Using this multi-stage approach to construct a polling project universe, we conducted 103 telephone interviews in the summer and fall of 2005, unearthing 54 active, regular polls of politics and policy in 35 states; 45 of these were university-affiliated.[8] At least 11 others had been discontinued in recent years—having fallen victim to waning interest and/or financial support—while four more were in the early stages of (re)birth. We believe these figures actually understate the robust enterprise of state polling today, although much of this work is not of the sort that advances state-level public opinion research in the way Jewell and others envisioned. For example, several full-service survey research shops reported that while they conduct dozens of statewide polls each year for public agencies on particular policy areas (e.g., transportation, health, and education) they could not point to one overarching poll that dealt with general topics of politics and policy in the way a "Minnesota," "Ohio," or "Florida" poll does. In addition, several interviewees pointed us to a small number of regular polling projects conducted by news or other private organizations that presented problems of unarchived, or ambiguously-archived, data among other challenges for our research design. With these caveats noted, Table 1 details the titles, years of establishment, and locations of the 50–plus projects meeting our criteria.

As the central thrust of this project was descriptive and most of our ques-

Table 1. State polling projects in the U.S.[18]

State	Project Title	Year Established	Contact
AL	Ask Alabama	2004	Auburn University
AL	Capstone Poll Omnibus Survey	1980	University of Alabama
AZ	Grand Canyon State Poll	1992	Northern Arizona University
AZ	Cactus State Poll*	1990	Arizona State University
AR	Arkansas Poll	1999	University of Arkansas
CA	Golden Bear Omnibus	2003	University of California, Berkeley
CA	*LA Times* Poll	1978	*Los Angeles Times* Poll
CA	PPIC Statewide Survey	1998	Public Policy Institute of California
CA	Field Poll	1947	Field Research Corporation
CA	California Consumer Confidence Survey	2004	San Jose State University
CT	Connecticut Poll	1978	University of Connecticut
CT	Quinnipiac University Poll*	unknown	Quinnipiac University
FL	FIU/Florida Poll	1988	Florida International University
FL	Florida Annual Policy Survey*	1979	Florida State University
FL	Consumer Confidence Index	1983	University of Florida
FL	Florida Issues	2003	University of North Florida
GA	Georgia Poll	1982	University of Georgia
IL	Illinois Policy Survey	1983	Northern Illinois University
IN	Indiana Poll	1983	Indiana University
IA	Iowa Poll	1943	*Des Moines Register*/Selzer and Co.
KS	Kansas Policy Survey	1985	University of Kansas
KY	Kentucky Survey	1979	University of Kentucky
KY	Courier-Journal Bluegrass Poll	1986	Louisville *Courier-Journal*
LA	Louisiana Survey	2002	Louisiana State University
ME	Maine Survey	1994	Market Decisions
MA	Bay State Poll	2003	Merrimack College
MA	Suffolk University Political Research Center Survey	2002	Suffolk University
MI	State of the State Survey	1994	Michigan State University
MN	Minnesota Poll	1944	*Minneapolis Star Tribune*
MN	Minnesota State Survey	1984	University of Minnesota
MN	SCSU Survey	1988	St. Cloud State University
MS	Mississippi Poll	1981	Mississippi State University
MT	MSU-Billings Poll	1989	Montana State University-Billings
NE	Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey	1977	University of Nebraska-Lincoln
NH	Granite State Poll	2001**	University of New Hampshire
NH	New Hampshire Poll	1976	American Research Group
NJ	Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll	1971	Rutgers University
NY	Marist Poll	1982	Marist College
NY	Empire State Poll	2003	Cornell University
NC	Carolina Poll	1977	University of North Carolina
NC	Elon University Poll	2001	Elon University
OH	Ohio Poll	1981	University of Cincinnati
OK	Oklahoma Social Indicators Survey	2002	Oklahoma State University
PA	Keystone Poll	1992	Franklin and Marshall College
SC	South Carolina State Survey	1990	University of South Carolina
TN	MTSU Poll	1998	Middle Tennessee State University
TN	Tennessee Poll	1989	University of Tennessee
TX	Texas Public Policy Survey	1981	University of Houston
UT	KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll	1982	Brigham Young University
VT	Vermonter Poll	1990	University of Vermont
VA	Quality of Life in Virginia	1992	Virginia Tech
VA	Commonwealth Poll	1990	Virginia Commonwealth University
WA	Elway Poll	1992	Elway Research, Inc.
WY	Wyoming Election Year Survey	1972	University of Wyoming

* Despite repeated attempts, we could not arrange interviews with the directors of these projects, the particulars of their polling projects thus are not included in our analyses.

** Poll has been conducted regularly since 2001, but sporadically since the late 1980s.

tions were open-ended, most of our tables[9] supply quantitative summaries of the broadest state polling patterns, "fleshed out" qualitatively with the comments of the interviewees. In the interests of space, Tables 3 through 6 are available on the *SPPQ* website. Table 2 provides an overview of the key characteristics of currently active state-level polls, as described by the 51 directors who agreed to be interviewed.[10] With respect first to the frequency with which such polls are conducted, the open-ended format of our instrument generated a far wider range of responses than we anticipated. While one-third of state polls are annual affairs and another handful are conducted only every other year, respondents were forthcoming about the fact that adverse conditions (usually financial) sometimes intervene to interrupt that pattern. Directors of the remaining projects reported being in the field between two and 12 times each year with many offering an initial response amounting to "it depends." Further elaboration revealed that a good many projects produce more polls in election than non-election years and that, in many cases, directors used to conduct more polls than they do currently; time and resources were the most frequently cited contributors to this change.

Other poll characteristics treated in Table 2 include several measures of the size and scope of state polling projects. With respect first to length, we asked respondents to describe their projects in terms of both the average number of minutes and the typical number of questions. Twenty minutes was by far the most frequent response on the former measure though the range again was wide: from five to 35. The mean length, when operationalized as number of minutes, was 16.4. Respondents encountered greater difficulty estimating the number of questions included on a standard poll. Not only did some report doing multiple polls each year of varying size (e.g., one project ran very short "spot news" polls most months supplemented by a 100–question-plus omnibus poll perhaps once a year), but question format (i.e., closed- versus open-ended and multi-parted items) also pre-

Table 2. Basic Characteristics of State Polling Projects in the U.S.

Characteristic	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Mode	SD	Median	Valid N
Age (in years)	1	62	18.4	3, 14, 16	14.0	18	51
Frequency (per year)	0.5	12	3.3	1	3.1	2	51
Length (minutes)	5	35	16.4	20	6.3	15	51
Length (questions)	15	132.5	66.3	60	27.3	61.3	26
Sample size	400	4000	855	800	555.8	800	51
Cost per poll	$1,000	$100,000	$23,403	$25,000	$19,630	$20,000	44

Note: The open-ended nature of our protocol revealed far more nuance than captured by this summary table. For example, when respondents offered a range of values in their responses (e.g., a typical sample size of between 600 and 800), we used the average value in our calculations here (e.g., 700).

sented a challenge to our request for a "ballpark" estimate. Nevertheless, 26 interviewees offered quantifiable responses and the pattern that emerged is compatible with the time measure: the typical state poll is composed of 66 questions, but ranges from 15 to in excess of 130. Our final "scope" measure (sample size) showed relatively little variation across states. One in four projects collects the responses of between 750 and 850 people and three in four between 500 and 1,000, although an innovative and long-lived exit poll project in one state boasts a minimum of 4,000 interviews each election year and more traditional projects conducted in several of the least-populated states collect samples of only 400.[11]

We expected, and found, even greater diversity on the money end of things. (See Table 2) With respect first to the total per-poll amount reported by respondents, fully one-quarter of currently active projects cost $10,000 or less, while another quarter are conducted for $30,000 or more. The remaining projects hover at or around a mean cost of $25,000 per poll. It became clear as our collection of completed interviews mounted that part of this variation was due to the type of callers engaged by project directors. For example, eight respondents reported relying solely or in part on unpaid students enrolled in courses on public opinion, survey methodology, or research methods; generally speaking, these were among the least costly endeavors.

Another factor explaining the tremendous variation in state poll budgets lies in the difficulty some respondents had in distinguishing direct from indirect costs. While our interview instrument unfortunately did not allow for a detailed account of each project's revenue sources, it quickly became obvious that articulating a per-poll dollar amount was most difficult for those conducting statewide policy polls as just one of many projects carried out by a full-service survey research shop (as opposed to faculty members or policy institute directors who supervise just one poll). Additionally, the amounts survey shop directors did articulate were usually on the low end because, although a handful reported receiving financial support from a parent university or institution, most conduct omnibus state polls at (or under) cost, operating off the fumes of otherwise client-based budget engines and/or off the revenue generated by selling question space.

With respect to the role of question-selling in the revenue streams of state polling projects, more than two in three of the 51 projects we studied are indeed financed, either wholly or in part, through the sale of poll space. In all but a handful of these cases, however, restrictions are in place regarding who may purchase questions. Candidates and parties were mentioned most frequently as strictly forbidden, but some shops further restrict the client pool to public agencies and nonprofits. The rate structure for question-buy-

ing is somewhat fluid. For example, adjustments are made for open- versus closed-ended questions, bulk buying, and the provision (or not) of question design or analysis services. In addition, for university-affiliated polls, faculty members sometimes purchase space at a discounted price.

Overall, whether client-based or funded through host institutions (i.e., media organizations, universities, or think tanks), most respondents (61 percent) reported their current level of resources to be adequate. Still, fully one in three directors is not satisfied with the financial health of his or her project, and the vast majority admitted to harboring wish lists that nearly always included bigger samples and more frequent polls. As one interviewee noted "it's cobbled together every time" and "the loose change approach is difficult."

We also were interested in the purpose and content of state polls. On the first score, when asked to characterize the mission of their statewide survey projects, most respondents articulated multiple and overlapping goals. Still, four distinct categories emerged from the open-ended responses (see Table 3). Public service was the most frequently mentioned goal, with directors emphasizing the importance of supplying impartial information to policymakers, the public, or the media in a way that, as one respondent offered, "enhance(s) the public discourse within our state." Tracking the public's preferences over time, providing an affordable data collection vehicle for nonprofits and public agencies, and injecting scientific measures of public opinion into political news and the policymaking process were commonly cited aspects of such service. Research and teaching constituted the second and third most frequently mentioned contributions of state polls, but each was articulated by less than a quarter of respondents. Specifically, many university-affiliated directors pointed to their statewide surveys as valuable avenues for faculty hypothesis testing and grant-generation or as a way to involve students in hands-on research.[12] The fourth purpose, explicitly mentioned by only seven interviewees but an important residual benefit for many more we suspect, was publicity for the host institution. In some cases, this meant that running a high-profile statewide political poll served, quite literally, as a "basic marketing tool" to attract clients or boost subscriptions. In others, particularly polls conducted by university departments or research centers, the benefits were more abstract, such as "showing the public that the university is doing something useful." As one interviewee noted with respect to the media coverage generated by his poll, the college's administration "can't buy this kind of advertising."

With respect to the content of state polls, three distinct categories of questions emerged from the open-ended responses (see Table 4). Most com-

monly mentioned were political issues, including ballot measure and candidate preference, public figure approval ratings, "most important problem," partisanship and ideological identification, and trust in government, as well as specific policy matters (e.g., education, abortion, gay and lesbian rights, healthcare, immigration, gambling, tax policy, etc.). Social or lifestyle issues constituted a second category of state poll content, spanning an equally wide range of topics. Recent polls have probed respondents about stress levels, home ownership, crime victimization, health insurance coverage, Internet access, nutrition, alcohol and tobacco use, organ donation, cell phone usage, and more.[13] Finally, economic issues supply the third leg of state poll content. Directors most commonly described using standard measures of consumer confidence and of respondents' own financial situation.

Because data that can be compared across time are of particular interest to public opinion scholars, we also asked interviewees whether their projects include questions that are repeated at regular intervals. The overwhelming answer was yes. In fact, only five of 51 respondents could not point to at least one (non-demographic) time series element in their projects. Further, one of the five only recently dropped such a battery in favor of freeing up additional space for client purchase, and another, the director of a relatively new project, offered that he "would like to do that."

The most frequently repeated questions on state polls include job approvals (usually for the governor, the president, and the state's U.S. senators) and election match-ups, trust in government, economic well-being and consumer confidence, most important problem, various "quality of life" measures (e.g., "right track/wrong direction"), and a handful of policy-specific items (e.g., abortion, capital punishment, immigration, etc.). When probed further about why their regularly-conducted batteries include approval ratings (83 percent of all projects do) and horserace items (71 percent of all projects do) given their relatively higher risk potential, most directors simply noted that such matters are newsworthy and provide good publicity. Several also suggested that, as one respondent put it, election polling "demonstrates that we're a real outfit." A significant portion (11 of the 37 who do track elections), however, expressed considerable frustration with this aspect of polling. As one director complained "somebody is always p.o.'d and convinced that [we're] dummying up the results." A handful of our interviewees reported consciously downplaying (nine of 51),[14] avoiding (four of 51), or recently quitting (two of 51, but one recently started back up) the election prediction business altogether as a consequence.[15]

Given the frequency of such allegations and anxiety, we also were interested in whether state directors believe their polls have an impact on state

politics and policy. A strong majority believe they do, although we found two distinct perspectives on the nature of this effect (see Table 5). Most interviewees answered this question, at least at the outset, by commenting on the degree to which their poll results are, as one quipped, "noted and quoted." Specifically, two in three respondents pointed to the appearance of poll findings in legislative debates (e.g., "in the cloakrooms, they beat each other over the head with it"), interest group literature and lobbying efforts, and letters to the editor. They also noted their own regular consultation with governors, legislators, and staff. For adherents to this first perspective, then, the fact that their efforts "are very heavily attended by the politicians and observers" provides its own source of satisfaction. "If nothing else," offered one long-time veteran of state polling, our data "show you what the average citizen thinks. And so it opens up the political system."

More than one-third of respondents, however, pointed to concrete examples of policy change caused, or at least heavily influenced, by the results of their statewide polling projects. Among the wide assortment of policy decisions cited (many directors supplied more than one): a ban on cell phone usage while driving, an end to state-run liquor stores, tighter restrictions on the use of all-terrain vehicles in state forests, the abandonment of a plan to adopt a unicameral legislature, the introduction of various forms of gambling, an increase in the state minimum wage, continued resistance to a state income tax, the resignation of a scandal-ridden governor, and somewhat ironically, the adoption of a state-level do-not-call list. One of the most colorful examples of a direct policy effect provided to us involved a flap over the teaching of sex education in public schools. Although legislators seemed to be of one mind that their conservative, southern constituents would "never condone it," according to our interviewee, after the release of a state poll demonstrating otherwise, a sex education curriculum was adopted forthwith.[16]

Finally, we probed our respondents at some length about collaboration with other state polls, both in terms of past experience and future interest, and about archiving practices that would at least facilitate after-the-fact comparability. On the first score, only one in four (N=13) poll directors reported having engaged in cooperative state polling and approximately one-half of these were one-time partnerships with a single state. Many were enthusiastic about the idea, volunteering responses such as "not yet," "we've talked about it," and "we definitely have an interest in doing that." In fact, when asked near the survey's close about participating in creating a standardized battery of questions to be used for comparative analysis, every respondent was interested in the possibility. Caveats, however, were offered in nearly equal abundance. As summarized in Table 6, the obstacles anticipated by our

interviewees relate mainly to cost, question-wording, and time.[17] Thus, while interest in cooperative state polling remains strong among those directing state polls today, multiple and difficult-to-identify challenges yet abound.

A practical alternative to the adoption of a shared state poll battery may lie in more conscientious efforts to archive state polling datasets. Given the frequency with which project directors report relying on the same databases for question construction (e.g., Gallup, the NNSP, Roper, the General Social Survey, and the American Public Opinion Index), careful archiving would improve the feasibility of multi-state public opinion projects (in the sense that researchers could more readily identify and analyze a series of state datasets that serendipitously include similarly-worded questions). Again, however, the actual prospect of such activity remains dim. While many directors post their work on their own websites, in only a dozen or so cases does this appear to include raw datasets downloadable in their entirety, and access is often limited only to polls conducted within the last few years. And although many more supply finding summaries and cross-tabulations, these are of limited utility for academic researchers. Even more, while the electronic data repositories, such as those hosted by the NNSP and the University of Connecticut's Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, certainly hold great promise, only 14 of 51 respondents reported active participation in such efforts. Non-participants noted that they maintained their own archives or, more commonly, that they simply lacked the time, resources, or incentive to transmit clean datasets to a central storehouse. As one director explained, somewhat guiltily, "it's just a time factor. Every time I look [at the NNSP database] I think 'damn, we should archive our polls.'"

CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR IMPROVED ARCHIVING AND REGIONAL POLLING PARTNERS

So what is the state of U.S. state polls? In many ways this project demonstrates that while the state polling enterprise is robust, opportunities for multi-state data analysis remain daunting. On the first score, fully two-thirds of the U.S. states have at least one major polling project which fits our criteria, and 13 have two or more. Moreover, each is conducted on average more than three times a year. Most state polls also are of substantial scope with a mean length of more than 16 minutes (60–plus questions) and a sample size of more than 800. Also promising is the fact that most polling projects exist primarily to serve one or more of three common purposes—public service, teaching, and research—and the fourth (publicity for the host institution) appears to bolster interviewees' capacity to participate in the first three. Patterns in

content also bode well for both governance and scholarship. Most state poll directors not only craft questionnaires centered around the political, social, and economic issues of the day, but they commonly pull questions from other projects and, in many cases, have created valuable time series data by doing so at regular intervals. As a consequence, the vast majority report that their projects do influence the politics and policy of their states.

With respect to cooperative state polling, however, the vision of Jewell and others remains unrealized. The two chief obstacles, we believe, remain unchanged from decades past: resources and rewards. Poll funding varies widely, both in amount and source. A handful of projects operate off of large endowments or have direct budget lines from their host institutions, while the majority of others depend, wholly or in part, on the "loose change" generated by contract work or on the sale of poll space. In the latter case, cooperation in an interstate battery must be subsidized by the (usually) intrastate clients of the survey research shop. A less concrete resource, time, appears to affect an even larger portion of today's state poll directors and likewise diminishes the prospect of multi-state public opinion research. Not only would the design and execution of common question batteries detract from directors' other duties, but a seemingly practical alternative to that approach—improved archiving of state-level data in the common repository supplied by the NNSP and/or Roper—was reported to be too cumbersome for most to partake.

A second major challenge to collaborative state polling is found in the diversity of reward structures faced by polling directors in varied job situations. Although it was not an explicit item in our interview protocol, we quickly developed an awareness of three central types of state poll directors. The first, and probably most common, operates a full-service (usually university-affiliated) survey research shop. While he or she may also retain a connection to an academic department, job success largely, or even solely, is defined as the number of paying clients or contracts served in a particular year. The second type of poll director is the traditional academic and most often looks to a department of political science, sociology, or communication/journalism for his or her incentives. Although the public service, educational value, and publicity benefits of a state poll may produce both personal gratification and approving noises from college administrators, measurable output generally takes the form of scholarly publication. Media and think tank affiliates constitute the third type of poll director. Their incentive structure is derived from the needs and interests of newspaper editors, state politics reporters, and "good governance" benefactors. This diversity of motivations joins limited resources in retarding collaborative state polling because it leaves some directors with little motivation (or ability) to accommodate multi-

state research projects that are unfunded, unlikely to generate a line on the *curriculum vitae*, or of limited interest to the general public. As Jewell noted in 1982: "Such projects require the continuing commitment of a number of persons over long periods, and there are many opportunities for conflicting goals, changes in career plans and interests, and competing professional demands to erode cooperation among a number of scholars" (656).

Nonetheless, our interviewees were uniformly interested in the idea of collaboration and this fuels our optimism that greater cooperation among state polls is possible, toward the ends of better governance, richer datasets, and improved public opinion analysis. We propose that regional cooperation—together with more conscientious data-archiving, as noted above—is the place to start. Several earlier efforts, although short-lived, proved fruitful (at least for academics and media organizations), and many interviewees volunteered that their greatest interest lay in the comparison of their own state's attitudes with those of their neighbors. The coordinators of such collaborations might elicit initial participation by selecting a perpetually "hot" policy topic, outlining a specific scholarly product, and perhaps most importantly, proposing to leverage the first collaboration into a major funding proposal of benefit to all (see also Jewell 1982; Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1985). By anticipating the motivations and limitations of each type of potential participant, an enterprising individual or group could shrink the resource and reward challenges before tackling logistical issues such as timing and question wording. In this way, sustained cooperative state polling finally might be brought to fruition.

ENDNOTES

1. Our emphasis on collaboration and comparison is not meant to diminish the value of the single-state study. Many illuminating research designs have made use of single-state data and we would agree with other scholars who have noted that in certain inquiries "a theoretically rigorous study of a single state is more appropriate than a less rigorous design that includes all 50 states" (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002, 412).

2. Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman (2002) point to numerous variations: different question wording, different answer options (e.g., not all polls report the percentage of negative responses, 2–category versus multi-category approvals, etc.), and different sampling targets (e.g., registered voter, likely voters, all adults).

3. See, for example, www.realclearpolitics.com and similar sites that are devoted almost exclusively to poll tracking, both nationally and in "battleground" states.

4. The multifaceted nature of this second criterion led us to reject projects that to a casual observer might look like perfect fits. For example, many university survey research shops conduct lots of polls, but they lack consistently-conducted, broadly-conceived

political projects of the sort examined here. We classified fully 26 polling projects in just this way; such units do indeed poll state residents, but for one state agency or nonprofit group at a time and on an irregular schedule. This approach is of little utility to most scholars of public opinion and state politics.

5. Occasionally, such searches revealed a different polling source in that state, either instead of or in addition to the one sought; these also were included in the universe we constructed. When available, we printed paper copies of the histories, mission statements, recent news releases and the like for any clearly identifiable state polling projects. These resources proved valuable in crafting our long protocol.

6. Potential bias could result from such "snowball sampling" (Goodman 1961), but such bias is "inversely related to the proportion of the target population interviewed" (Welch 1975, 3). Because our target population is small and we are confident we reached a very high proportion of that population, we believe our results are widely representative of the universe of state-polling projects meeting our criteria.

7. Our four-pronged approach produced neither a single regular polling project nor a potential contact for Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Utah, and West Virginia. In these cases, we added another step: contacting the state politics and public opinion experts affiliated with at least two state universities. This effort uncovered long-established projects in Montana and Utah and a defunct project in Colorado, but confirmed the lack of a regular state poll in the remaining states.

8. Interviews ranged between approximately two (for respondents reporting no active statewide poll) and 30 minutes in length. See Appendix A available at www.ipsr.ku.edu/SPPQ/research.shtml for the complete protocol.

9. Tables 3 through 6 are available at www.ipsr.ku.edu/SPPQ/research.shtml.

10. To encourage a forthright exchange of sometimes sensitive information, we provided interviewees with anonymity for the purpose of reporting results. Thus, individual characteristics of particular projects are not identified in this paper.

11. Although some interviewees volunteered the information, we dropped from the final protocol a question regarding who state level polling projects contact, i.e.., registered voters, likely voters, or adult residents. Our sense is that among at least one-quarter of our respondents, this varies from year to year, poll to poll.

12. According to one director, another seemingly unique teaching-related purpose of conducting a statewide survey is the very act of visiting with a handful of citizens selected at random. It "is an eye-opening experience" for the mostly upper-middle class white students populating his classes, the respondent noted.

13. Although many batteries of this sort are client-driven, several directors declared their own interest in tracking, as one respondent put it, "the soft underbelly of (our state's) psyche."

14. The most frequently mentioned tactics for downplaying horserace polling were polling weeks to months in advance of the election or delaying the release of the results until the result was known.

15. Among poll directors who do not incorporate approval or horserace questions on their statewide projects, the most frequently offered reason was that they did not want to be "seen as trying to affect elections." This response was of particular interest to us because so many respondents, early in the interview, pointed directly or indirectly to improved public policy as a core goal of their projects.

16. Interestingly, Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg's essay on the utility of "regional polls"

used a nearly identical example more than 50 years ago. Noting that a 1948 Minnesota Poll discovered that nearly three-quarters of their sample believed that "sex education should be taught in the public schools, as well as in the home," the authors concluded that "the practical usefulness of such a poll could be to adopt the principle of sex education in Minnesota, irrespective of the sentiments of other states" (1949, 585).

17. Although we ran a multivariate model on the notion that older, university-affiliated, frequently-conducted, non-client-dependent NNSP members would be most likely to collaborate, not a single anticipated pattern emerged.

18. Again, the criteria for inclusion in our study were: (1) the poll must be a regularly conducted effort to examine the public's attitudes on policy and politics in that state and (2) poll directors must make their methods, results, and data publicly available. See text for further discussion.

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