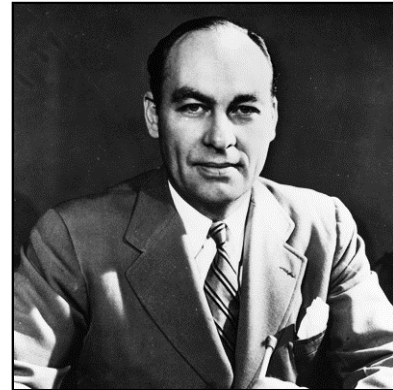


George Gallup

1901–1984



WHY HE MADE HISTORY A public-opinion statistician, George Gallup's work with public-opinion surveys changed political campaigns and marketing.



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As you read the biography below, think about how George Gallup's work transformed the way politics is practiced by politicians and reported on by the new media.

Today Americans are accustomed to hearing about the results of public opinion polls on topics ranging from political elections to consumers' favorite foods or television shows. But without the pioneering work of George Gallup, polls might be very different.

Gallup was born into a dairy farming family in Iowa. He earned multiple degrees in political science from the University of Iowa, where he worked as an editor on the student newspaper. His PhD dissertation was on the subject of measuring reader interest in newspapers; this early interest in public opinion would shape his career.

Gallup began teaching journalism. In 1932, he joined an advertising agency in New York City, where he conducted public-opinion surveys for clients. While still working for the advertising firm, Gallup began founding a series of public-opinion research organizations, including the American Institute of Public Opinion, the British Institute of Public Opinion, and the Audience Research Institute, Inc.

He first rose to public prominence in 1936 when he successfully predicted the winner of the 1936 presidential election. At the time, the most significant political poll was operated by *Literary Digest*, a popular magazine. In each presidential election year, *Literary Digest* mailed out questionnaires asking respondents who they planned to vote for. The poll was highly accurate at picking both the winner and the margin of victory.

The problem with the *Literary Digest* poll, Gallup felt, was that it relied on voluntary responses from people. Only people with a strong interest in the poll would respond, he believed; thus it did not represent the views of Americans as accurately as a scientifically random poll. Before the 1936 presidential election, Gallup sent interviewers to randomly selected towns throughout the United States, where they interviewed people according to

the demographic groups that reflected the country's population. For example, if 10 percent of Americans were men between the ages of 30 and 40, approximately 10 percent of the people interviewed by Gallup would be men between those ages.

The *Literary Digest* poll surveyed over 2 million people and predicted that Alfred Landon would win the presidency in 1936. Gallup's poll, on the other hand, surveyed only 5,000 respondents and predicted that Franklin D. Roosevelt would win the election. When the election results came in, Gallup was correct.

Gallup's ideas about scientific polling changed the way that companies and political campaigns measure public opinions about consumer products, social issues, or political races. He believed that public-opinion polls were an important way of promoting democracy by channeling the feelings of a great number of people into the electoral and governing process. Since polls showed what voters wanted, they allowed politicians to respond to those wishes. Gallup wrote several books on the subject of polling, including *The Pulse of Democracy* (1940) and *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide* (1972).

In 1958 Gallup combined his various organizations into the Gallup Organization, which still exists today. It offers a number of statistical services to clients, including political polling.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Why did Gallup believe the *Literary Digest* poll was unreliable?

2. **Evaluate** Do you agree with Gallup that public-opinion polling promotes democracy? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY

In small groups, create a public-opinion poll about an issue of your choice. You may want to ask questions about a political issue or an issue of importance in your school. Polls should include at least five questions and should be neutral and unbiased. If time permits, ask other groups to complete your poll.