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Is opinion polling a good or bad for Presidential politics? The answer can take into account the views of voters, politicians or both.

The value of opinion polling in Presidential politics depends largely upon the prism through which you look at the question. From the view of the electorate, the national focus on opinion polls devalues Presidential politics by reducing the level of public discourse, lessening the breadth of issues addressed, and focusing media attention more on the process than on the candidates. On the other hand, from the view of the candidates opinion polling is incredibly good for Presidential politics as they provide insights into the electorate that are impossible to achieve by any other means.

From the electorate's view, our nation's focus on public opinion polls reduces the level of public discourse in the country. An anecdotal example is this year's swift boat controversy. Polling indicated that 29.9 percent of undecideds in a 2-way race are less likely to vote for Kerry due to ads attacking Kerry's military service.¹ The "dent" these ads caused in the polls made them too irresistible for political operatives to ignore. With issues such as education polling in the single digits, politicians are much more likely to focus on these "cheap hits" than real, substantive issues.

The focus on public opinion polls also lessens the breadth of issues addressed. Polling indicates that 70 percent of the electorate is primarily concerned about the economy, the war in Iraq and Terrorism.² As a result, other issues such as health care, stem cell research, education, and gun control have received significantly less attention. As a politician, there is little reason to expose yourself to a wider array of critiques when polling indicates you can safely remain within a limited segment of the issue spectrum.

Finally, the importance of public opinion polls focuses media attention more on the process than the issues. In 2000, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, 62 percent of media stories were about tactics and the horse race between the two candidates.³ This focus on the process creates a less informed electorate, which almost by definition is bad for our political system.

On the other hand, public polling is a tremendous advancement for Presidential candidates. Simply put, polling provides insights into the electorate that could not be attained through other means. FDR used polls to divine what arguments would be most useful in justifying American participation in World War II. John F. Kennedy used polling to figure out which states were so biased against Catholics that no amount of campaigning would overcome existing perceptions.

In conclusion, it seems likely that public opinion polling is not necessarily good or bad for Presidential politics. Polls help educate candidates in a way conventional methods are unable to match. Instead, it is the national obsession with polls that have done the most damage, by lessening the level of public discourse and by distracting the public and the media from issues of greater importance.

¹ Tony Fabrizio, "Swift Move," *National Review Online*. 26 Aug 2004. <<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/fabrizio200408260845.asp>>

² Cheryl Arndt, "Poll: Candidates in Dead Heat," *ABCNews.com*. 13 Oct 2004. <<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=162357>>

³ "TV's campaign focus is issues, think tank says," *Indianapolis Star*. 20 Oct 2004. <<http://www.indystar.com/articles/5/187677-4545-047.html>>