

*Guide to the Microfilm Edition of the*

1988

**Presidential Election Polls:  
The Gallup/Conus Reports**

With an introduction by Larry Hugick

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## **Publisher's Note**

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By Larry Hugick  
*The Gallup Organization Inc.*

The election year of 1988 represented a milestone in modern presidential politics. For the first time since state primaries and caucuses decided the nominating process, the presidential primary season began with an open race in both parties. Barred from seeking reelection by the 22d Amendment, President Ronald Reagan, the dominant figure in national politics during the 1980s, chose to stay above the fray rather than to endorse George Bush, his vice president for two terms, or any other candidate for the Republican party's nomination.

While Bush's tenure as vice president helped him become the early front-runner for the Republican nomination, many political observers questioned whether, after serving in a subordinate role for eight years, he could become a convincing leader. Journalists noted that no vice president had been elected president since Martin Van Buren defeated William Henry Harrison in 1836.

There was also no clear front-runner for the Democrats. Neither Gary Hart, whose candidacy suffered after the *Miami Herald* exposed his extramarital affair with model Donna Rice, nor Ted Kennedy, who lost the nomination to Walter Mondale in 1984, entered the race. Of the seven Democratic candidates, only Jesse Jackson was well known to voters across the country. But if there was one thing that most political observers agreed upon, it was that no black candidate, especially one as controversial as Jackson, was likely to end up winning the Democratic party's nomination.

The Gallup Organization approached the 1988 election with over fifty years of presidential election polling experience since George Gallup's first poll in 1936. Since then the survey methods had been refined, but the way the polls were conducted and distributed remained much the same. In 1984, as in previous elections, the Gallup Poll depended on national in-person interviews for its reports on the presidential race, and the results were released in a nationally syndicated newspaper column.

All that changed in 1988. To cover the wide-open 1988 presidential race, Gallup's Andrew Kohut and Nancy Nygreen combined with Conus Communications, which specialized in providing satellite news feeds to local television stations. This resulted in the development of a preelection polling package for news organizations that was unprecedented in its scope.

The tight deadlines of television news departments required major changes in how the polls were conducted. For the first time, Gallup's regular presidential polling was done entirely by telephone, which reduced the turnaround time between drafting survey questions and reporting results. Gallup also offered state and regional surveys to subscribers to provide more localized information during the primary season.

The Gallup polls eventually found roughly twenty-five U.S. television sponsors who owned first broadcast rights in their local markets. WEEI Boston made the poll a regular feature in its coverage of the campaign, and NHK Tokyo was a major foreign broadcast sponsor.

Although Gallup broke new ground with the addition of broadcast outlets for its presidential polls in 1988, the polls continued to be featured in close to one hundred domestic newspapers that either subscribed to the polling package or received the results on a somewhat delayed basis in the biweekly Gallup Poll column. The Los Angeles Times Syndicate distributed the poll reports to newspaper subscribers; newspapers that carried poll results regularly included the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

Aside from the broadcast and newspaper subscribers, the polling service was also offered to political, governmental, academic, and business groups. The polls had subscribers among all of these sectors, including research firms, political committees, university libraries, and major corporations. The costs of the reports varied by the type of subscriber, the market, and the material provided. While a big city newspaper purchasing the package on a market-exclusive basis paid as much as \$25,000 for the regular weekly reports, an institution interested in receiving

data sets on a delayed basis paid about \$5,000. Subscribers interested in receiving only the weekly reports, not for immediate publication or broadcast, paid less than \$1,000.

The polls were designed to provide material for forty-four weekly television and newspaper stories on the presidential race and to make that information as timely and relevant to campaign coverage as possible. The polling schedule, completed in December 1987, planned for thirty-three polls through the November election, including eighteen polls in specific states or regions.

Because of Gallup's objective to provide in-depth coverage of the nominating primaries and caucuses, twenty-two of the polls were conducted between the time of the Iowa caucuses, the first primary election, and the June California primary, the last major primary. The polling schedule also reflected the nomination process. Thirteen of the polls were conducted between early January and Super Tuesday on March 8, when thirteen states, mostly in the South, held primaries or caucuses.

During the primary season, each survey consisted of 1,200 interviews among registered voters, except for those "projection" polls that were conducted in the final weekend before a state primary. These final polls were based on a sample of 3,000 registered voters per state. Once the primaries ended, the sample size for the national polls was reduced to 1,000 interviews, with a few exceptions. The final November poll had a sample size of 3,000 interviews.

The telephone survey methodology used in the preelection polls was consistent. Registered voters were screened from a random sample of residential telephone numbers for the geographic area being sampled, whether it was a state, a region, or the nation. Nonvoters were asked three or four demographic questions so that the sample could be weighted according to the latest census information about the adult population, including sex, age, race, education, and, in some cases, geographic region and Hispanic origin.

Most of the interviews were conducted over a three-day period beginning on a Friday evening and ending on Sunday. If the first telephone call to an eligible respondent failed to make contact, two more attempts were made. During surveys immediately before an election, “refusal conversions” were attempted by telephone interviewing supervisors who called back those households where someone initially declined to be interviewed.

The final national survey and the final projection pre-primary polls in individual states were designed to provide daily results over the three-day period such that any late shifts in candidate support could be detected. For these final polls, 1,000 interviews were conducted each day of the three-day period. Each set of results was then weighted separately in order to minimize demographic differences between each day’s results.

Polls conducted more than a week before an election day were based on all registered voters interviewed or, in the case of the primaries and caucuses, based on all who intended to vote. Polls conducted in the final days before an election included a set of turnout questions so that results could also be reported on a likely voter base. The turnout questions used were those Paul Perry and others at Gallup had developed thirty years earlier, and the questions had demonstrated their accuracy in later studies of Gallup’s personal interview preelection surveys.

The format of the reports sent to subscribers each week during the campaign was standard. Each report began with a description of the survey methodology, followed by a short report highlighting the results to a few key questions — generally the trial heat or “horse race” results. This first section was compiled for television subscribers and was followed by a longer analytical piece that Andrew Kohut and I wrote for print subscribers. The weekly reports also included selected tables that broke out demographic differences to key questions, plus a technical appendix that included the exact question wordings, question-by-question results, and information about the sample.

The reports were written under tight deadlines. They were typically put together on a Monday and sent out to clients that

same day; television stations were embargoed from releasing the results until 5 o'clock on Tuesday, while newspapers were embargoed from publishing the results until Wednesday morning. The schedule for reporting the final "projection" poll results was even tighter. Gallup processed and analyzed the results from the first two nights of interviewing on Sunday morning for release on television that evening and inclusion in Monday morning newspapers. Subscribers then received the full results on Monday for immediate release, based on the full three days of interviewing.

Unlike exit polls, where the final analysis is released after the results of the election are known, the Gallup polls had to be completed before the election outcome was certain. In retrospect, there are a few cases where the analysis clearly missed the mark, such as the final reporting on the New Hampshire Republican primary. But for the most part the polls held up well.

Gallup's reports provided a perspective on the race that was often missing from other election polls. When Michael Dukakis led early in the campaign, Gallup cautioned against reading too much into the early lead because he lacked a well-defined image. Gallup's polls also debunked the notion that George Bush had such a negative "wimp" image among voters that his candidacy was doomed to failure. In July, prior to the Democratic national convention and well before the Willie Horton ads aired, the Gallup polls identified the Massachusetts prison furlough issue as a key factor behind the drop in Dukakis's popularity. The polls also stated correctly that the "Quayle factor" (Bush's selection of Dan Quayle as his running mate) was unlikely to have much of an effect on the outcome of the election. Despite the bad reviews of Quayle's performance in his debate against Democratic vice presidential candidate Lloyd Bentsen, later polls showed that the proportion of voters who said Quayle was qualified to be president had actually increased since the debate.

These reports and the supporting data represent the single best source of preelection poll findings and analysis for historians, political scientists, and graduate students. Historians can find a wealth of information about how the public viewed the candidates

at various stages of the campaign. Particularly striking is the improvement in George Bush's image immediately after the Republican national convention. Political scientists and graduate students can also find information about how the voters in 1988 viewed the political parties, the presidential nominating process, and the candidates' television advertisements.

The 1988 presidential election may end up as a milestone of a different sort. Election reforms, such as shortening the campaign and restricting the amount and types of advertising, became an issue in the later stages of the campaign. Noted more for its war of made-for-television "sound bytes" and negative advertising than for contrasts in political ideologies, the campaign may prove later to have been the one to spur substantive political reform. Whatever the eventual judgment of history on the 1988 campaign, the Gallup reports will remain one of the best sources of information about how Americans viewed politics during that year.



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<i>Roll</i>	<i>Frame</i>	<i>Survey Title</i>
1	0001	Iowa Survey I January 1-3, 1988
	0135	New Hampshire Survey I January 8-10, 1988
	0264	The South Survey I January 15-17, 1988
	0376	National Baseline Survey I January 22-24, 1988
	0484	National Baseline Survey II January 22-24, 1988
	0519	Iowa Survey II January 29-31, 1988
	0671	New Hampshire II February 12-14, 1988
	0755	The South Survey II & Massachusetts Survey I February 19-21, 1988
2	0001	Florida Survey I & Texas Survey I February 26-28, 1988
	0278	Texas, Florida, & Massachusetts Survey II: March 4-6, 1988
	0628	National Issues Survey II March 10-12, 1988
	0741	New York Survey I March 25-27, 1988
	0848	Gender Gap Analysis April 4, 1988
	0889	Ohio Survey I April 8-10, 1988
	1017	New York Survey II, Report I April 15-16, 1988
3	0001	National Survey III April 21-23, 1988

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<i>Roll</i>	<i>Frame</i>	<i>Survey Title</i>
3	0116	Ohio Survey II April 29-May 1, 1988
	0271	California Survey I May 5-7, 1988
	0474	National Survey IV May 13-15, 1988
	0663	California Survey II June 3-5, 1988
	0832	National Survey V June 10-12, 1988
	1004	National Survey V: Nomination Process & Campaign Issues June 10-12, 1988
4	0001	National Survey VI June 24-25, 1988
	0067	National Survey VI: National Issues June 24-26, 1988
	0139	National Survey VII July 8-10, 1988
	0264	National Survey VIII July 22-24, 1988
	0536	National Survey IX August 5-7, 1988
	0635	National Survey IX: Image of George Bush and the Economy August 5-7, 1988
	0749	National Survey X: Campaign Interest August 19-21, 1988
	0812	National Survey X August 19-21, 1988

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<i>Roll</i>	<i>Frame</i>	<i>Survey Title</i>
4	0967	National Survey XI September 9-11, 1988
5	0001	National Survey XII September 27-28, 1988
	0160	National Survey XIII October 7-9, 1988
	0476	National Survey XIV October 21-23, 1988
	0638	National Survey XIV: Opinions of Candidates & Campaigns October 21-23, 1988
	0710	Final National Survey November 3-6, 1988

